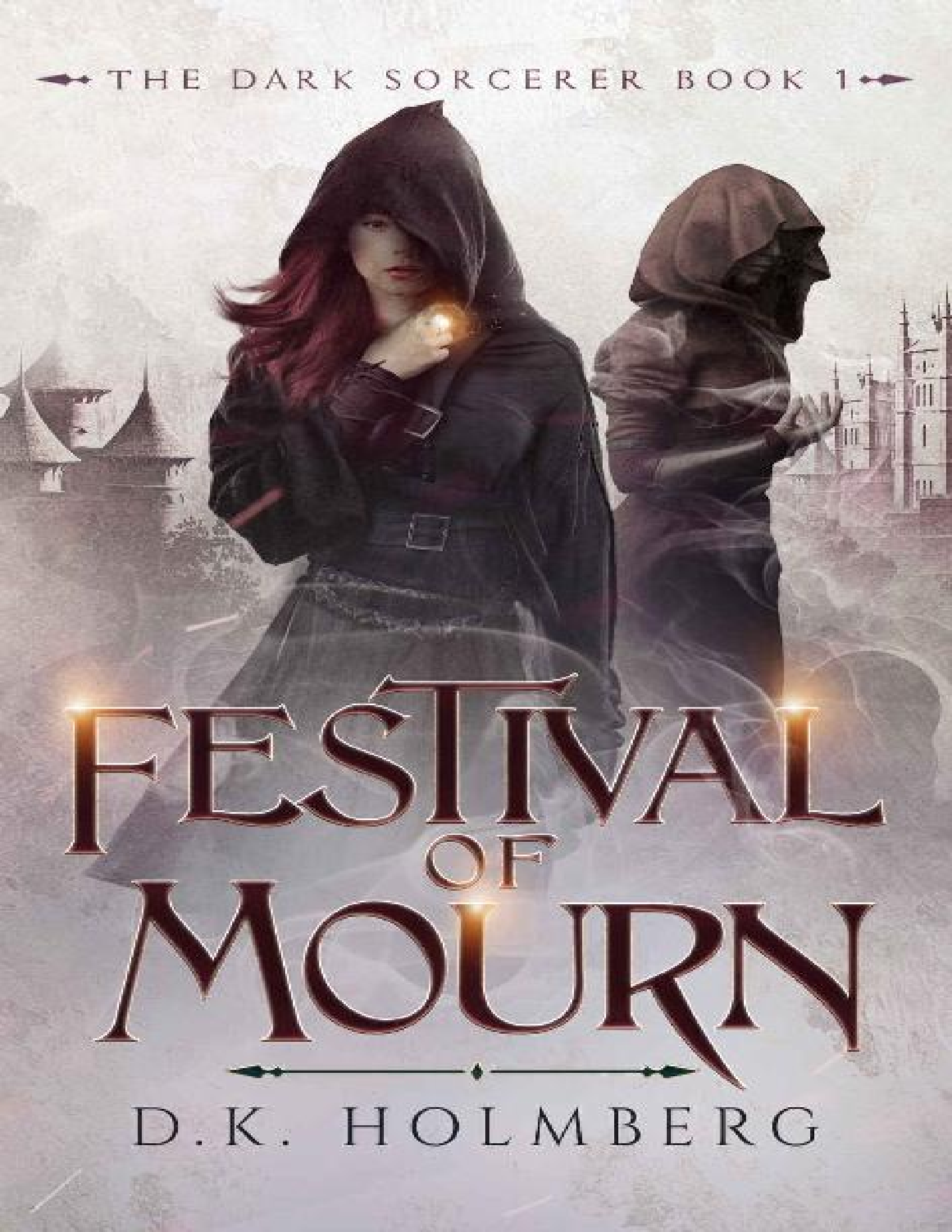


THE DARK SORCERER BOOK 1



FESTIVAL OF MOURN

D.K. HOLMBERG

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FIGHTING A SINGLE BANEWIG WAS NEVER ALL THAT DIFFICULT. Fighting five was another matter altogether.

Jayna backed up and immediately began tracing a series of three overlapping triangular patterns in the air, adding the power of sorcery through those patterns, and generating what she liked to call the blade of light. It surged out from her, something like a sword, but not one that she had to hold to use. The light cascaded outward, illuminating the darkness of the damp forest, and blasted out in a band.

“You need to be a little more careful with that,” Eva snapped. Smoke trailed around her, swirling outward, though it didn’t do anything to help fight against the banewig other than keep them off Eva.

Five of the banewig snapped at them, the sudden surge of brightness that the blade of light had created giving Jayna just enough illumination to see the outline of their forms. Were it not for the line of jagged fangs that snarled at her, they might almost be considered cute. They had short, stubby fur, and reminded her a little bit of a weasel—if a weasel wanted to rip through her flesh and consume her. A single banewig wouldn’t be able to do that, though five might be able to.

The blade of light wasn't going to be as effective as she needed it to be. A single blast of energy could only be used against one attacker. There was something she could try, but it meant she was going to have to position herself in front of Eva.

Jayna started tracing the pattern. Sorcery like this was a little more complicated. It took time to master, and these were the kind of spells she had learned while studying at the Academy.

As she pushed power out through the spell, a series of sparkling lights exploded outward, striking three of the creatures, eliciting a horrible shriek that split the air. She called this her starburst pattern, though it probably had some other name, and the destructive magic it elicited would most likely be frowned upon should anyone from the Sorcerers' Society discover she used it.

"You could help," Jayna snapped, looking over to Eva.

Her friend had on a pale white dress that seemed out of place here along the outskirts of the forest, though her heavy, gray cloak was probably too warm.

"I could," she said. The smoke still swirled around her, but it wasn't directed in the way Jayna knew Eva could use it.

She could, but her comment meant she had no intention of doing so.

Which meant Jayna was going to have to do this on her own.

Then again, it was her assignment. She was the reason they were here, after all.

After tracing another starburst pattern, she pushed power out from her, exploding it out and around, and realized that in doing so, the banewig had backed away, disappearing into the trees.

"Great," Jayna muttered. "Now I have to chase them."

Eva sniffed. "Isn't that your assignment?"

Jayna glowered at her before casting a quick spell. This one required little in the way of patterns, and it led to a ball of glowing light in front of her. That was one of the earliest spells she had learned in the Academy, and though it couldn't really be used in a violent manner—an approach she found herself needing to use with increasing frequency—there was some benefit to it.

“Are you going to come with me?”

“I will accompany you, but I have no intention of dealing with them.”

Jayna just shook her head. She tucked her deep red hair under the hood of her cloak, keeping it from getting in her eyes, and started forward. She wasn't about to argue with Eva about any of this. She had helped as much as she was going to, and Jayna doubted she would offer any greater assistance.

The pale white stone ring on her finger pulsed.

Jayna turned her attention to it. The ring itself was nondescript. Plain stone, though it was of a pale, almost milky white. There were no symbols on it. No decoration. Nothing to indicate its power.

And now it constricted around her finger, leaving it throbbing.

She had learned to follow the pressure she felt from the ring. There was a directionality to the throbbing, and she knew better than to ignore it. It was her assignment, and the entire reason that she had the ring in the first place.

They hadn't gone far into the trees when she caught sight of two of the banewig. They scurried toward her quickly, fangs snarling, and Jayna reacted, erupting outward with another starburst pattern. The power consumed the banewig, and they exploded in a flash of light.

“How many were left?” Jayna asked, looking over to Eva.

“I'm not going to help you hunt them.”

"You don't have to help me hunt them. I was just asking a question about how many were left."

Eva frowned at her before letting out a long sigh. "I don't want to be a part of any of this."

"You could've stayed back in the city."

"I don't want anything to happen to you either."

It was almost enough to make Jayna smile. Eva was surprisingly protective for somebody so mysterious. It came from her fragmented memories, and from the fact that Jayna had saved her life when she'd found her injured and dying along the road nearly a year ago. Jayna had just left the Academy, taking the first steps to understanding how to use the ring that had been given to her, and had not expected to have company. She was thankful for it though.

"All I need is to know how many more might be out here."

Eva took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and the smoke began to swirl around her even more. Gradually, that smoke billowed out and into the forest. As it did, Eva's eyes closed, her jaw clenching, and then they snapped open.

"There are seven more, and they aren't very far from here."

"A nest?"

That was surprising. Banewig were known as dark creatures. They had started as something natural, but they had been twisted by dark magic, the kind that fed on pain and sacrifice, until they were something else. They were the kind of creatures that dark sorcerers used, and they tended to be attracted to those with magic. Maybe that was why they were here. This city was a place of magic. Not potent magic, as most within the city were only capable of minor magic, but the kind that could place enchantments upon items—nothing like true sorcery, but magic nonetheless.

"Maybe this is why Ceran sent me here," Jayna said, following the direction that Eva indicated.

She didn't prefer coming into the forest in the darkness, but that was when the ring had started constricting, guiding her, and she had learned early on that she had to follow it as soon as it did.

"I'm sure you could ask," Eva said.

"He's not particularly vocal when I ask," Jayna said, twisting the ring absently. It connected her to his power, granting her a unique kind of magic that she drew from him, but it also hurt to use.

"You don't have to keep serving him," Eva said.

Jayna could take the ring off. She had many times. Especially when she felt the throbbing in her finger to be too much after using the power that it connected her to. But she served for a specific reason, and she wasn't going to be able to find what she wanted without using the kind of magic that the ring, and Ceran, provided.

Eva held her gaze for a moment, and then she pointed once more.

Jayna slowed and stared into the darkness, her glowing orb pushing back the shadows nearby.

Her ring throbbed continuously on her finger. Whatever she was going to find would be here soon. She was close.

She moved carefully now, creeping forward, preparing the starburst pattern, when a flurry of movement surged out of the darkness.

There had to be a dozen banewig.

Some of them were quite a bit larger than the ones she had seen before—nearly the size of a fox, perhaps larger than that.

She unleashed the starburst pattern and started another, but it wasn't going to be enough. Smoke swirled around her and Eva as Eva's unique form of magic flowed. Jayna had one other type of spell that she was skilled with, but the fire whip, as she called it, wouldn't be as effective as she needed against this many creatures.

Her only remaining option was to use the power of the ring.

She swore under her breath and focused on the tension within the ring. The banewig were pressing up against the smoke ring Eva had generated, and within a short period of time, they would press through it. Jayna was certain of it.

She took a deep breath, then began to access the power of the ring.

The first thing she felt was pain.

It was cold, and it burned up her finger, extending into her wrist, and soon would work its way up her arm. She rarely let it go much longer than that. She had no idea what would happen to her if she allowed herself to continue to access the power. It might destroy her. That was her concern.

As soon as she tapped into that power, she could feel the energy within it. The nature of that magic was different than that of sorcery, but they were complementary.

She re-created her starburst pattern and forced the energy of the ring through it, causing the pattern to explode outward—a wash of power that streamed away. When it slammed into the banewig, they simply disappeared.

That was the power of the ring. It was dangerous. Deadly.

And it just might be dark magic.

She pushed outward, sending the ball of light beyond the ring of smoke, and saw no further sign of banewig.

That one spell was enough.

Using the blade of light, she destroyed the collection of branches forming the banewig den, and licked her lips, turning to Eva.

“I hate using that,” Jayna muttered.

“He gave it to you to use.”

Eva was always so practical, but as far as Jayna knew, she didn’t have the same pain as Jayna did when she used

her magic.

"He gave it to me to use, but he hasn't told me the secret to ignoring the pain when I do."

"Maybe there is no secret. Maybe it's a matter of tolerance and dealing with as much as you can."

"I don't like using it," she said again. "But it is effective."

She started to say something more when the ring began to vibrate.

It was a quite different sensation than the painful constriction she felt when she detected dark magic around her. She had learned to follow the constriction, knowing how to use it to find the dark creatures she was supposed to follow, but it also meant that she often had to begin using power she didn't want to use. But in this case, it was a vibration, not painful at all.

And it meant Ceran was close.

"You can come with me."

Eva shook her head. "I might return to the city."

"Are you sure? You always avoid it when we are summoned by Ceran."

"We are not summoned by him. *You* are summoned by him."

"He does know that you've been helping me."

"And that is what I'm concerned about," Eva said, her full lips turning in a frown. She shook her head, pulling the hood of her cloak over her raven hair, and turned away without saying anything else. She marched through the forest until she disappeared, the shadows swallowing her.

Jayna suspected that Ceran preferred Eva didn't come with her, though he never said anything. He would have to know that she had help, given everything he'd asked of her and everything they had done; it was more than what Jayna would've been able to do on her own.

The ring continued to vibrate, and she followed it into the forest. She held the glowing orb in front of her, but it only pushed back some of the darkness, as if the forest itself

had protections against the magic she had infused in the orb, preventing her from squeezing power out too far.

Sorcery was but one kind of magic. She had learned it while studying at the Academy and was only limited now by what she could remember. Had she stayed longer and continued her training, she might have become skilled, but other needs had changed the direction of her studies of magic.

In this part of the world, there were not as many sorcerers as there were in other parts of the kingdom, though the Society had connections everywhere. The dular, men and women who could place enchantments upon items, were far more common in the city of Nelar. It was a weaker power than that of sorcery, though most believed it similar. Rather than requiring specific knowledge, it involved emotion and intuition, but also the same connection to magic.

Others approached magic differently still. There were the Urguin who borrowed from sorcery, though perhaps not intentionally. Jayna had never met any, and she was far enough from their homeland in the southern mountains that she doubted any would travel this far. They used strange objects in their magic, like bones and leaves and dirt—objects that most sorcerers would consider barbaric, if only because they didn't command nearly as much power as sorcerers possessed.

There were those who had natural and intrinsic magic. Sorcerers had one aspect of that, though it was augmented by the spellcraft they utilized. The El'aras who had once lived in these lands were the most well-known, primarily because their kind of magic was so different from that of sorcerers. It didn't involve spellcraft, herbs or powders, or any patterns and incantations. It was power that flowed from within them. True and natural power.

Then there were the Sul'toral.

Jayna had not even known about them before Ceran had found her. She didn't know how many there were, only that they were powerful and could gift that energy to others. She questioned whether Ceran and other Sul'toral pulled on the power of the gods themselves, but so far, Ceran had not answered that clearly.

She twisted the ring on her finger, feeling the humming of magic within it, the summons.

The forest continued to grow darker and deeper around her.

Then the vibration stopped.

So did Jayna.

"Here?"

"I figured I should check on you considering what I just detected." Ceran's voice came from the shadows, though she couldn't see anything, which wasn't terribly surprising.

Ceran had a rich, almost musical voice, and there was a trace of an accent that she could not determine. In the time that she had been working with Ceran, she had never really learned where he was from, nor did she know all that much about him. She still didn't really know why he had chosen her, other than because of the kind of questions she had started to ask in the Academy.

"You don't usually come so quickly," Jayna said.

"And you don't usually draw so much energy."

"Am I taking too much from you?" That was how she called upon the power within the ring. She borrowed from him, and the power he could access, but she believed that he had an infinite amount of power. Certainly, he had to have enough to lend it to her.

He chuckled, but he didn't step out of the shadows. That was unusual. Usually, Ceran made sure that she saw him.

"It would be difficult for you to take too much. Besides, it is not only my power you borrow."

"I thought the ring connected me to you."

"It connects you to me, and it augments that connection, but there is something within you that connection unlocks." She heard a soft rustling of leaves, but he still didn't step forward. "What, did you think that I only chose you because you were chasing darkness while at the Academy?"

She flushed. "I wasn't chasing darkness for myself," she said, stepping toward him. "I still want to know what happened to my parents. And my brother."

"I can't guarantee those answers," Ceran said. "I have never been able to guarantee them. All I offered was the chance to learn."

She breathed out in a sigh, pushing the orb closer to the sound of his voice, but none of the darkness near him parted. Ceran was too powerful for that.

"What now?"

Typically, when she completed one assignment, Ceran sent her somewhere else. She had traipsed all over throughout the year she had served him—hunting creatures, containing dark magic until he could reach her. That was how he often used her. He didn't want her to destroy all creatures of darkness, though he typically didn't care. He had taught her to contain them, hold them, until he could destroy them. It had been like that with a shisii that she and Eva had found on their way to the city of Nelar, a creature of darkness that fed on blood. She had only held it until he had come and destroyed it.

"I will need you to remain within the city a little longer."

"Why?" she asked carefully.

"What have you seen over the last month?"

"Besides the banewig and the shisii and the neverkin and the—"

"Besides all of that," Ceran said.

"I suppose more than I had in the first few months I served you. I figured you were sending me where I was needed."

"I was sending you where there was activity," he said. "And now I'm afraid there must be a reason for that." There was another rustling; leaves that she couldn't see fluttered. He didn't step out of the darkness, and certainly wasn't close enough for her to see him. He was more imagined than real at this point—just a voice. "I have had you pursuing these creatures, but now you must be on alert for those who control them."

Jayna blinked. "You want me to watch for dark sorcerers?"

"I did not say you would have to confront them, merely find them. There is not much beyond the city of Nelar. The forest becomes too dense, and the El'aras too . . . cantankerous . . . to have them move beyond."

"You think there will be sorcerers here?"

"Sorcerers, or perhaps their volar."

Jayna knew some about the volar. They serve sorcerers, and were closer to dular than true sorcerers, using enchantments that were created out of pain and sacrifice. "And you just want me to find them?"

"Find them. Signal to me. And then we will continue your training."

"I don't mind chasing the dark creatures like you have me doing," she said.

"You and I both know you were always going to need to do more than just that," he said. His voice seemed to have gone more distant, as if he were retreating from her.

"I'm not ready to take on a full-fledged dark sorcerer."

She hadn't even completed her time at the Academy, so to go against a sorcerer would be more than she could withstand. She had the ring he'd given her, and while there was power within it that she could access, a fully trained sorcerer had knowledge that she simply did not.

"Unfortunately, I have begun to suspect our time to keep working on what must be done is growing short."

"You only told me how to access the power of the ring."

He laughed again, sounding somehow both pleased and irritated at the same time. "You don't need lessons on how to access the power, Jayna. You understand that connection well."

"Fine. Then you haven't taught me any other advanced spells."

He had revealed the blade of light, the starburst, and the fire whip to her—all spells that she wouldn't have learned at the Academy. They would've frowned on magic like that, and for good reason.

"In time. For now, be alert. And you will remain in the city until we understand what they intend."

"I've already been here nearly a month," she muttered.

"You don't care for the continuity?"

"It's not that," she said. She wasn't about to tell Ceran the real reason she didn't love being in the city. She hadn't even revealed that to Eva.

"I fear that it won't be—"

Ceran fell silent.

"Ceran?"

The ring pulsed once, then fell quiet.

He was gone.

She grunted. All of that and now she had to stay here.

She made her way back through the forest, holding the ball of glowing light in front of her, and traipsed through the darkened city, wiping moisture off her cheeks. Nelar was a humid place, and often unpleasant. At times, it was difficult to breathe. There was a foul odor to the air, a mixture of mold and something she couldn't quite place. She tolerated the city but didn't love it.

She reached the small home that she and Eva rented, pushing it open. Eva sat near a crackling hearth, a glass of wine already in hand, looking over to her.

"I guess we're staying."

"That's unexpected," Eva said. There was a slight slur to her words.

Jayna glanced to the bottle of wine resting on the floor in front of her and wondered how much Eva had already drunk.

"Now we are looking for more than just the dark creatures." Eva leaned forward, frowning. "He thinks there will be volar. Or possibly dark sorcerers."

"Are you ready for that?"

Jayna grabbed a glass and took a seat across from Eva near the fire. The warmth wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't necessary. The city was warm enough. Still, it was a dry heat, and it burned away some of the dampness in the air. She poured herself a glass of wine, ignoring Eva's annoyed look. "I don't know. But it seems like I don't have much choice in the matter."

THE STREETS WERE EMPTY, THOUGH NOT COMPLETELY SO. IT WAS late enough that anyone who was out had some purpose, and at this time of night, Jayna suspected that most of them had nefarious reasons.

"You sure about this?" she asked Eva, looking over to her.

They crept along the streets. Most of the buildings along here were of a single story and made of stones slicked by the humidity in the air. Moss grew along many of them, giving off a pale glow and leaving a faint reflection, an illumination, in the night. It was one more thing about this annoying city that she didn't love. There were no places that were completely dark.

"You wanted evidence of dark magic users."

Jayna glanced down at her ring. "I haven't felt anything."

"Are you sure you would?"

"No."

While she believed she would know when magic was used around her, she wasn't completely convinced she would know dark magic. It was different from following a creature tainted by dark magic. Those had a particular sense to them, and more than that, they caused the ring to

constrict. She had never felt a constriction in any other city she had visited. And she still did not now.

"I've been asking around, and I have heard a few things that led me to think we will find them here."

"In a tavern?"

Eva shrugged. "I didn't say it was unpleasant work."

It had been two days since Ceran had called to her in the forest, and in that time, both she and Eva had searched through the city, looking for anything that might suggest dark magic users. Eva was better equipped for them than Jayna. People tended to share things with her that they wouldn't share with others. Jayna wasn't sure why, and couldn't tell whether it was some part of the magic Eva possessed, or whether it was simply her.

They stopped at a small, dark, stone building, the moss that covered many of the buildings nearby having been scrubbed free, though not completely. There remained a hint of a glowing layer of it, and the pale light reflected off the dampness of the stone.

"Do I even want to know how you found this place?"

"Do you?" Eva asked.

Jayna just laughed, but she cut herself off as Eva pushed the door to the tavern open. There was a steady din of voices inside, suggesting that despite its appearance, it was a popular location. She followed Eva into the tavern. It was dark, with only a few lanterns for light and a darkened hearth along one wall, the damp logs stacked inside it suggesting that it hadn't been used for years. There were about a dozen tables inside, and most had people seated around them. Eva took a seat at a table near the back of the tavern, and she looked up, locking eyes with one of the servers, before turning her attention back to Jayna.

"I don't detect anything here," Jayna said.

Detecting sorcery was not a difficult challenge—at least, most of the time. There were ways to do so, but often that involved using sorcery itself. She tried to avoid doing that

as much as she could. If the Sorcerers' Society detected that she was using unregulated magic, they would come after her. They were far enough to the edge of the kingdom that there weren't nearly as many sorcerers here as there were in other places, and their influence was not as powerful here as it was elsewhere, but the possibility remained that they might be around.

"Give it time," Eva said. She flashed a smile when a young man approached the table. He grinned at her, his smile lopsided. "I hear you recently acquired a cask of Yilt wine."

The young man—or boy, more likely—nodded. He continued to grin ruefully at Eva. "We did. Master Nev was pleased. He thinks it might even draw people in. I guess I can tell him that it worked."

Eva nodded. "We will take two glasses. Oh, and a bottle to go."

The boy's eyes widened. "I'm supposed to make sure you have enough coin before I fill the bottle," he said. He glanced behind him before turning back to Eva. "I'm sorry. Not that you don't look like you can afford a bottle, it's just —"

"We understand," Jayna said, noting how Eva's brow had darkened. She fished into her pocket and pulled out two Nelar silvers. "I don't know how much you need, but . . ."

The boy flushed. "That will be more than enough. Again, I'm sorry."

"The wine," Eva said, in a shorter tone than she had the last time.

"Of course."

He scurried away.

"You know, for someone who is good with people—at least, good with getting information on people—you can be somewhat of an ass when it comes to your wine."

"I don't mess with fools when it comes to that," Eva said, sweeping her gaze around the inside of the tavern. "Now, if

the rumors are correct, there are a couple of men new to the city who have been coming in here more often. The tavern owner—”

“Nev?”

Eva nodded. “That’s the one. He told me they’ve been meeting here for the last week. He overheard their conversation, and . . .” She spread her hands off to either side of her. “Like I said. I don’t know if they are volar, but it’s likely. Probable, even.”

The boy returned, carrying a bottle and two full glasses.

“How much?” Jayna asked.

“Just one silver.” He glanced over to Eva. “And I’m surprised you were able to get it for so little. When Master Nev heard who it was for, he said he didn’t want to charge you too much.”

Eva looked past the boy and flashed a smile, but it wasn’t for him. It was for a dark-haired, older man, leaning on a counter running along the back wall.

“You can tell Master Nev that I thank him for his generosity.”

The boy bobbed his head then scurried off.

“You could have been like that to the boy,” Jayna said.

Eva took a drink, closing her eyes and sighing. “It really is a wonderful vintage.”

Jayna just chuckled. She watched Eva as she slowly drank half the glass, saying nothing the entire time, and finally opened her eyes again, looking across the table to Jayna, as if realizing she was still there.

“It’s times like these when I seem to remember things,” she said.

“Wine won’t fill your memories. Most would claim that it takes them.”

“It’s not the wine,” she said, shaking her head then leaning back and taking another drink. “It’s more what I feel when I drink it. With the right glass, I can taste the

grapes, the earth, and can feel." She shook her head again, breathing out slowly. "It doesn't make any sense to me."

Jayna had learned not to push Eva, especially not when it came to her fragmented memories. She had some intact memories, such as how to use the strange magic she possessed, though she didn't like to talk about that either. She knew nothing about where she was from, nothing other than her name. Jayna even wondered if Eva truly was her name. There was the possibility she had simply made it up.

"I often see things that remind me of my brother," Jayna admitted. She reached for her pocket before she realized what she was doing. She kept a letter folded up in there from her brother, Jonathan. She had looked at it often enough that she had long ago memorized its contents.

In his neat script, he had scrawled a note stating that he was going to be gone for a month, and not to worry, then he had drawn a symbol. Or a pattern. She didn't know.

When he had disappeared, a common occurrence for him, a month wasn't a long time. He often disappeared for several months at a time when taking jobs, but he always sent word back to her. After what had happened to their parents, Jonathan had made sure she was cared for. It was only after his last disappearance that he had stopped providing care for her, that he had stopped giving her attention, and it was the first time she had felt truly alone.

She twisted the dragon stone ring on her finger, the one she had gotten from Ceran.

"You've been chasing rumors of your brother for as long as I've known you," Eva said. "But what kind of thief would be all the way out here?"

The thief being Jonathan. "I don't know," she said. "Is . . ."

She trailed off as the ring started to throb.

It was a different throbbing from what she had felt when chasing dark creatures, and different from the vibration she

had felt when Ceran summoned her. This was something soft, though it steadily began to squeeze.

She stared at the ring, but it didn't change. It never did. The stone was impossibly hard, and while it looked like bone, she didn't think it actually was. She didn't know what kind of enchantment it had, though she was certain it was enchanted. It had to be for it to grant her a connection to Ceran.

"Something is coming," she said.

Jayna turned her attention to the door. The pressure on the ring persisted, growing more intense.

Then the door came open.

She had always imagined dark sorcerers having a specific appearance—black cloaks, rather than the maroon ones worn by those in the Society. Enchantments fueled by pain and sacrifice.

These men looked normal.

But the pressure along the ring persisted.

"Volar. It has to be."

One of the men had a pointed nose and a tight goatee. The other was short, almost foppish, which made him stand out a bit inside the Wandering Pen, the tavern that even Jayna would rather not be in.

They took a seat at a table in the corner.

The ring continued to squeeze.

"Go over there," Eva said.

Jayna glanced in her direction before shaking her head. "I don't need to go over there. I need to know what they are talking about."

"Are they saying anything?" Eva asked.

"Not that I can tell," Jayna muttered.

She twisted the ring. That wasn't going to be of much use here. There might be a spell she could use if she could only remember it. That was the issue with having left the Academy when she did. She had learned the basics of sorcery, which was what the Academy taught—how to follow

spell books, how to generate magic intentionally—but anything more complicated than that was taught outside of the Academy.

That was the reason she had needed to learn spells from Ceran.

There was one that might be useful, which involved drawing the wind. It might carry the words of their conversation over to her.

But it also might fail.

She started tracing the pattern, at least as much as she remembered of it, on the table.

Eva looked over. “Are you sure about that?”

Jayna shook her head. “Not really.” She looked up. “You know that you could—”

“No.”

“You don’t even want to try?”

“I think I have tried enough on your behalf lately.”

“You could help, you know.”

Eva fell silent and took another drink of her wine.

That was all the answer Jayna was going to get.

She would have to do this herself.

She completed the pattern and studied it for a moment. It looked right, but it could also be spectacularly wrong. She needed to hear what the men were saying. If she pushed just a hint of power into the sorcery, maybe she wouldn’t flood it.

She began to draw upon the power within her.

As she did, she powered the pattern and felt it activate.

It was subtle, but that was what she was going for.

She directed the pattern toward the men.

It caused a gentle current of air to pull across the tavern, spiraling around, almost as if someone had thrown the door open.

Their voices came to her—muted, but clear enough that she could hear.

“We only need a few more pieces before we can begin.”

"Not just pieces. Days."

"I know when the festival will take place."

Jayna frowned, trying not to look like she was listening.
Days?

"Can you hear this?"

"I think everyone can hear this," Eva said.

"Great," Jayna muttered.

"If others are caught in conversation, they might not realize why they can hear this."

"Festival," Jayna whispered.

"I'm ready to finally reach the real . . ."

His voice went silent, and she realized her spell wasn't strong enough.

". . . festival of morn . . ."

Eva leaned closer to her. "Morn?"

Jayna's breath caught. "Not morn. Mourn. As in mourning." She turned to the men. She'd heard of the festival before. "Dark magic," she explained, releasing some of the tension within her spell. "And supposedly a superstition, though everything I've seen tells me that superstitions are real enough."

A Festival of Mourn was one way to call upon dark power. It was a way of accessing dark magic directly.

And they were going to hold one.

The question was why.

"This is what Ceran wanted me to find." Maybe even stop it. The two men didn't look terrifying. She had faced worse. And volar weren't powerful. They might have powerful enchantments, but she suspected that she could handle a simple enchantment.

"I'm going to get more wine," Eva announced, getting to her feet.

Jayna stared at her, watching as Eva sauntered over to Master Nev, before turning her attention back to the volar.

Who were now watching her.

"Damn," she muttered.

One of them pulled something from underneath his cloak, aiming at her.

A crossbow.

Pain surged in her leg. She looked down, blinking, and realized she had been shot.

The two men jumped to their feet and raced to the door.

Jayna staggered after them.

Pain continued surging along her leg, hot and burning.

"Eva!"

Eva remained locked in conversation with Master Nev, a full glass of wine in one hand.

Jayna staggered into the street, looking for the two men.

Something whizzed toward her, and she jerked her head back just in time.

Another crossbow bolt sank into the stone near where she'd just been. She staggered forward, yanking the first bolt out of her leg, wincing in pain. She pressed her hand down upon the wound. She could dress it when she got back to the home, or she could try sending a surge of magic through it. She didn't like turning her magic upon herself.

A shout rang out.

Jayna staggered forward, rounding a corner, her leg throbbing.

A young couple blocked her way. The woman had auburn hair, and she was leaning close to the man, murmuring to him. If Jayna were to blast through them, she could target the volar, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

She staggered forward again, stumbling for a moment, then sprawled on the ground. The couple ignored her, and by the time she got to her feet, she had missed her opportunity.

There was no sign of the volar.

She stood in place, then traced a quick pattern, a tracking spell, and infused it with just a little bit of power—not so much that it would alert any of the Sorcerers'

Society, but hopefully enough for her to detect the volar. They couldn't have gone that far.

In her irritation, she infused more power into it than she had intended.

There came a strange pressure along her skin.

Sorcery.

Someone had realized what she had done.

She released the tracking spell and limped back toward the Wandering Ten. She yanked the other crossbow bolt out of the stone and stepped inside. The murmur of activity remained, and it seemed as if no one in the tavern cared that someone had been shot here. They might not even know. It would at least explain why the volar had wanted to come here, of all places.

She sank down at the table where the volar had been.

Eva took a seat, holding her glass of wine in one hand, the bottle in the other. "Where did you go?"

"The bastard shot me." She brought her bloodied hand up, holding it out to Eva. "And you could have helped me stop them."

"I have, but this is your assignment, isn't it?"

Jayna glowered at her for a moment then looked down.

There was a scrap of paper on the table.

The men had left it behind.

She lifted the paper, staring at it for a moment.

"What is it?"

She tapped on it. "The symbol. Or pattern. I don't really know. I've seen it before."

"Where have you seen it?" Eva asked, tipping back the glass of wine and finishing it in a long gulp.

"On the note my brother left me."

JAYNA WOKE FROM A DEEP SLUMBER TO THE SOUND OF POUNDING. She had been dreaming. She had begun to see her brother in her dreams lately, as if he were still there, some part of him waiting for her. Jayna knew, even while sleeping, that it was nothing more than a dream. Her brother had been watching her in the dream, smiling, motioning for her to follow him down a darkened path where he disappeared. When she chased him, he had faded from view altogether, leaving her grasping at nothing but dark shadows.

When she sat up, her heart raced.

The experience of chasing the volar might have informed the dream of chasing her brother. Her leg still throbbed. She had resisted the urge to use too much magic in healing herself. She had used some as she had wrapped and dressed the wound, but not that much, as she had only a little experience with healing.

And she had more experience with it these days than she had while at the Academy. All students had an opportunity to learn some healing while in the Academy, but Jayna had never mastered more than the basics. Small wounds were easier for her than anything complex. Unfortunately, she had been forced to push herself during her service to

Ceran, trying to master the healing side of sorcery not only for herself, but for others, including Eva.

The pounding persisted.

Having seen the same symbol that had been on the letter Jonathan sent her, Jayna wasn't at all surprised that she would think of him in her dreams.

The pounding came again.

It wasn't her head. She wasn't that injured.

She looked around the room. The two back bedrooms in the home were both small. The stone walls were damp with moisture, and the ceiling was low enough that she always feared she might conk her head if she stood too quickly, though she never did. Jayna was not tall enough. Her brother was, though; Jonathan practically towered over her. Despite its small size, however, the home was a useful place, and all that she had managed to afford in the time she'd been in the city.

The bed was narrow, and as she sat on its edge, her feet touching the cool stone floor, she steadied her breathing. Her right thigh still throbbed from the crossbow bolt, and as she sat up, looking through the darkness, she wondered if maybe the pain was what caused the pounding in her head.

But that didn't seem to be the case either.

It came from the kitchen.

She dressed slowly, pulling on clean pants, wincing as the fabric brushed up against the injury on her thigh, and pulled open the door to her room, then staggered down the hall. She popped out to see Eva holding on to a fire poker, jabbing it at a blond-haired man stumbling around the room. His pale blue eyes were wide, and he flailed, spinning in place.

"Do you care to tell me what's going on?"

Eva stabbed the poker at the man, and he continued waving his hands, not at all mindful of the danger of the weapon Eva held. He was tall enough that he had to bend

his head, and it still brushed up against the ceiling of the house.

"This idiot was at the door. I found him lying on the ground in front of it, curled up. Considering what we went through last night, I thought maybe he was with the volar." She jabbed at him again, nearly impaling him with the poker. If she did, Jayna would have something else to repair. "When he came around, he barged into the house and then he started doing this. I still can't tell if he's with them."

Jayna rubbed the sleep from her eyes, finally seeing the kitchen. The table had been upended, and everything within the cabinets was scattered. Scraps of fabric Eva had been mending looked as if they were shredded by claws, left in a pile near the chair. One of the chairs was broken. They had precious little as it was, and losing even a single chair was frustrating.

"I've got this," Eva said. "You can go back to bed."

"I'm not leaving you out here with some strange man."

"He's just drunk."

Jayna glanced to her, arching a brow, biting back the first comment that came to her.

The man was several inches taller than Jayna, with a youthful-looking face and a hint of a beard, though the wispy kind that looked more like a five o'clock shadow. He flailed, his arms spinning in place, and he reeked of ale. He was pretty, in a young sort of way.

"I doubt he's with the volar smelling like that. How about we just put him back outside since he's drunk?"

"I've been *trying* to get him outside. The fool doesn't seem to pay any attention when I poke him."

"Maybe you need to poke him a little harder."

Eva shot her a look. "I've been trying to poke him a little harder, but he doesn't seem to care. What kind of idiot doesn't care about a poker jabbing into his belly?"

"We could put it into the fire," Jayna suggested. All she wanted was to sleep, and she couldn't do that until she got

rid of this man.

"Then you'd have something else to heal." Eva turned her attention to the man. "And here I was just trying to help, and he goes about doing this?" She jabbed him again. The man opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he staggered, turning toward Jayna.

Jayna noticed something about the man when he looked at her. His eyes looked blank. "I don't think this is just ale," she muttered. "Help me guide him."

She grabbed for the broken end of the chair, pulling it up and jabbing at the man. Between the two of them, they kept him trapped in the middle of the kitchen. He couldn't do any more damage. She wasn't about to have him tear up one of her stuffed chairs. She wouldn't be able to find anything quite as comfortable.

"Where do you want him to go?" Eva asked.

"I thought sending him back outside might make the most sense, but now . . ."

Seeing the strange look on his face left her wondering if perhaps that was the wrong plan. He didn't look as if he were in his right mind—something seemed off, and it was more than just the ale. She needed to try to use a little bit of power on him, but as she held her hand up, she didn't detect any magic coming from him.

She tried a bit of sorcery. It was somewhat dangerous to do, especially in the city here, but she figured that at this point in the night, she didn't have to fear that anyone in the Sorcerers' Society would detect her use of power. At least, she *hoped* they wouldn't detect her use of power. Given how tired she was, she thought it was still late in the night, but didn't know for sure.

"We have to try to help him," Jayna groaned.

She couldn't shake a nagging worry about this man. It didn't strike her as typical sorcery, which left her worried that maybe he was affected by something else. Perhaps dark magic, though she had never seen it used like this.

"The festival . . ."

His words were slurred and had a hint of an accent.

She looked at Eva, locking eyes with her for a moment.

"You heard him say 'festival'—"

She didn't get a chance to do anything else. The man collapsed.

His body twitched, then went rigid, and his eyes fluttered back in his head.

Jayna shared a look with Eva. She was still wearing the pale white dress she had worn earlier in the night, though it now looked as if it had a stain on one sleeve. Wine. Jayna shook her head. Eva enjoyed having wine far too late in the evening, and there were too many nights when Jayna had found Eva passed out in front of the fire. Given what it looked like Eva had gone through before she had met Jayna, she never said anything to her, though she worried about her mindset.

"Are you going to be *able* to help?" Jayna asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eva snapped.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She didn't want to antagonize her friend. That wasn't the purpose of this. "Can you help me get him on the cot?" She nodded to the small cot stowed near the back wall where Eva would sleep when she didn't fall asleep in the chair near the hearth.

"You can do it," Eva said.

"Eva!"

She tossed the fire poker off to the side and grabbed the man by the legs, leaving his arms and upper body for Jayna. They dragged him over to the cot, and Eva set him down while she unfolded it, propping the support beam underneath. Once done, Eva tossed the man's legs up on the cot, leaving his torso collapsed on the ground. Jayna grunted, dragging him as much as she could until she got the rest of him onto the cot.

Her Academy training now kicked in.

There were aspects of magic she could use to help him, but that wasn't what she wanted to try. Academy training involved natural magic as well, and she thought that was the most important to focus on. She tested his circulation. It was one of the first lessons her instructors and apothecary medicine had taught, wanting to ensure she knew how to feel for a pulse. It was one of the most important lessons. Circulation. Breathing. Without either of those, there would be no survival.

She tested the large artery in his neck, and could feel the blood pumping regularly. There was the strong stench of ale on him, though as she worked her hands along his sides, down across his legs, then back up his arms, she didn't feel anything wrong with him. Nothing physical, at least.

"Help me peel back his jacket," Jayna said.

Eva stared at her.

Jayna wanted to sigh. This was the side of Eva she didn't like. It was the self-destructive side. She'd probably had too much to drink, and maybe she'd said something to the man when he'd come in. She tended to do that, especially when drinking.

"Please," Jayna said. "I just need a little bit of help."

"Fine," Eva said.

They grabbed the man's gray jacket and started yanking. The fabric ripped, and Jayna shot Eva a look that she ignored. As they peeled back his jacket, leaving his shirt remaining, Jayna took a step back. He was breathing. He had circulation. Which meant they had time.

She moved the pale white shirt off to one side, examining his stomach and chest. He was muscular, more so than she had realized, and Eva traced her finger along his belly.

"What are you doing?"

"He's just so . . . pretty," Eva said.

Now her words were slurring.

How much had she drank?

The man had a deep purple bruise on his belly, and Jayna rolled him on his side, looking at his back. There was another one there.

"I think he just drank too much," Eva said.

"Like you're one to talk."

"I'm not like that," Eva said. "He smells terrible."

Maybe that was all it was, though when he had come into their home, he'd been agitated in a way that couldn't fully be explained by too much ale. She'd seen people do foolish things when it came to ale, including Eva on far too many occasions, but she didn't know if that was really all it was. Something didn't feel quite right.

Her training had prepared her to recognize illness, and she had seen enough people who ended up with strange afflictions, especially those of the less common variety. Working within the Academy had exposed her to all sorts of bizarre things. It was entirely possible that this man had been affected by something similarly unusual.

"What are you doing?" Eva asked.

Jayna reached into her pocket and pulled out the dragon stone ring, slipping it on her finger. "I'm just trying to see if there's anything more than what I can tell otherwise." She held it up against the man's chest and connected to the dragon stone.

Jayna held her hand in place, focusing on the man. His entire body was rigid. There was a sheen of sweat along his brow. He looked as if he were exerting himself.

She needed to know what was going on.

There was one way she could quickly learn, but it was not necessarily easy. More than that, if anyone were paying attention to the power she summoned, she could be discovered. She didn't need sorcerers discovering that she was still attempting to use her power. Still, she couldn't leave this man to suffer.

She took a deep breath, focusing on the dragon stone, and pushed power out through it, pouring it into the man. It

was more than what she used to heal herself. When she had sealed off the wound in her thigh, she had done so by simply using the stone itself, not by drawing power from herself. In order to detect what was wrong with him, she required her own intrinsic magic.

"You shouldn't do this," Eva said, backing away.

Jayna glanced over to her. "I'm not going to abandon him. It's no different from what I did for you."

As she looked over to the man, a terrible thought came to her. Hopefully this man wouldn't decide he owed Jayna a life debt the way Eva had. He obviously needed help. She had no idea what was going on, but she couldn't blame him for panicking after waking up with Eva standing over him. She could imagine Eva holding the fire poker the way she had when Jayna had come out of her bedroom, and how this stranger would have reacted.

She didn't want to use the dragon stone on him unless she could help it but she had little choice. There were some who could detect Toral power used, and she'd learned to be careful. Unfortunately, there were limits to what she could do without it. Before doing anything else, she had to know if it was more than just a physical ailment. She had to know if it was something magical. When someone pressed power out, it left a trail, but she couldn't detect anything. Maybe a void, but nothing more than that.

"I don't detect anything," Jayna muttered.

"I have something you can try," Eva said.

She stumbled away from the cot, heading to one of the back rooms.

"What are you going to do?"

Eva waved her hand and disappeared.

Jayna leaned over, trailing her hands over the man's sides, testing for injury, but not finding anything. Not that she actually expected to. Other than the bruising, she hadn't seen anything wrong with him. He didn't look injured. As Eva had said, maybe this was nothing more than

intoxication. If that were the case, then did she really need to do anything more to help him? He could sleep it off.

Eva stumbled back into the room carrying a small leather trunk. The surface was faded and cracked, and Jayna had only seen that trunk a few times before.

“Eva?”

“You’re right. We have to help him,” she muttered.

She set the trunk down and flipped it open.

Jayna looked inside and saw several small metal objects, each of them in different shapes. Enchantments for the most part. Those who created them would be called enchanter in her homeland, but in Nelar they were known as dular.

Some of the items looked to be miniature sculptures, as if they had been intricately carved, taking on features that looked like faces of the gods, or perhaps people Eva had known. Jayna had never learned the purpose behind those carvings. Eva didn’t know either, or didn’t remember. Others were simpler. Some were in geometric shapes. There was one that looked like a top she had played with when she was younger, back when her parents were still alive and her brother had been with her. They had spun the top, taking turns to see who could spin it the longest and keep it going. Jonathan had always been more skilled than her, though he seemed to take a delight in upsetting her top when it spun.

Then there were the simpler items. Some looked like simple hunks of metal, nothing more than that, though carvings along their surface suggested a deeper meaning to Jayna. Others had small barbs that came off, hooks she could imagine sticking in skin and drawing blood.

Eva picked up one of those. She gripped it in her hand and squeezed slightly. A drop of blood dripped out of her palm, landing on the man’s chest.

“Eva?”

“Just let me work,” she said.

She wasn't slurring her words the way she had before, but that didn't mean she was any less intoxicated. It worried Jayna that she was using her magic after having so much wine, but maybe it was better for her. In the time Eva had come to stay with Jayna, she hadn't practiced her magic that often. It was either that she feared doing so or she didn't know how.

A faint haze filled the air. It was similar to the haze Jayna had seen when running through the street, though this only swirled around the man, lifting off from where the droplet of blood had landed on his chest, and spinning in a pattern outward, rising up around him. It created a faint smoke, though it didn't have the smell of smoke—more like a pungent sort of aroma. It reminded her of the stench in the city that she had often detected when slipping through the streets in the darkness.

Eva muttered softly under her breath, whispering almost to herself, but the smoke didn't do anything different. She dropped another droplet of blood onto the man's chest, and the smoke rose again, the pattern shifting, becoming a bit more complex. Now it wasn't just a spiral, but it began to take on the shape of a funnel, spinning in place above his chest, lifting off of it, but then drifting down, as if she were attempting to press it into him.

The blood sizzled, as if it were getting hot on his chest.

Jayna could detect an energy in the air. It left the hairs on her arms standing on end, and something like a shock coursing through her veins. It was the power of Eva, a power she never spoke of—one that was so different from the power of sorcery. It was an intrinsic kind of magic she had never understood. Magic Eva tried to hide from others, especially here in Nelar, where she feared someone detecting her use of that magic.

As the blood sizzled on the man's chest, the smoke drifted and flowed around him, but nothing else happened.

Finally, the smoke started to dissipate, drifting back out of the room, fading into nothingness. The droplet of blood that had landed on his chest had disappeared. It was almost as if the blood itself had turned into the smoke.

Eva trembled for a moment, opening her hand. A pool of blood inside her palm had dried, and the strange barbed piece of stone was stuck into the flesh of her palm. She plucked it free, wincing as she did, and set it down into the leather case.

"I'm sorry. It didn't work."

Eva rarely talked about her magic. "Does it hurt when you do it?"

"Every time."

Jayna knew so little about the kind of power Eva used; she only knew that it came from something within her—blood, typically—but there were other ways she could access power as well. She had learned not to question, knowing that either Eva didn't want to or didn't remember enough to talk about it, and knowing also that Eva preferred to hide her magic, as if she were afraid of it being discovered. She had never seen anything like it before, and had questions, but in the time she'd been working with Eva, she had never received answers.

"We still need to help him," Jayna whispered.

"Maybe he's just drunk." Eva staggered, nearly stumbling, but Jayna was there, catching her.

It was more than just intoxication impacting the man.

"It's more than that," she said, watching the man.

She flicked her gaze over to Eva. Seeing how the wine and the magic mingled within Eva clarified that even more for her. The man suffered from some sort of magical impact.

"I'm going to need help," Jayna said. "I don't remember enough sorcery to help him."

Maybe if she would've stayed at the Academy, she might have learned what she needed, but having left when she

did, offered a different power so that she could find her brother, she had not gained that knowledge.

“Ceran?” Eva asked, the word slurring.

“Not him. I doubt he’d help right now.” She had no idea what he was working on, only that he’d made it clear he was preoccupied. But this man needed help—and he might know something about her brother. “Which means I need to ask a friend.”

At least, Jayna hoped he was still a friend.

THE CART RUMBLED THROUGH THE STREETS, THE SOUND LOUD against the cobblestones. It was nearly morning, though still dark out. The air had a pungent aroma to it, mixing with the oppressive humidity and making it difficult for Jayna to catch her breath. She thought the three of them—Eva, the man, and herself—were the only people out in the street at this time of the day, though she feared the volar might still be waiting for her. There had been no sign of them, not that she would've expected them to hide—at least, not from her. The volar had no reason to fear her. There had been no signs of sorcerers either.

She glanced down at the man. They'd managed to lug him into the cart, though it hadn't been easy. With every jostle, she looked down, hoping it might get some reaction out of him, but each time they hit another bump in the cobblestones, he remained completely still. It made her think he was growing increasingly weak.

"How much farther do we have to go?" Eva asked.

Jayna shook her head. "We have to cross the city. The eastern side."

She had avoided visiting this part of the city. Even when she had, she did so in the deepest darkness of night, under the cover of shadow, and never in the early morning like she

did now. She certainly never visited while dragging a cart with an injured man on it.

"Do you know if he's going to help?" Eva asked.

"I don't," Jayna whispered.

"And if he doesn't?"

She sighed. "If he doesn't, then we have to hope this is only intoxication."

"You still haven't tried all of your abilities," Eva said.

Eva was right. She hadn't attempted to use all of her abilities. Jayna had held back, though she had done so because she needed to. If she used too much power, she was going to draw attention to herself. There were other sorcerers in the city. Maybe not as many as in some places within the kingdom, but certainly enough to detect her use of magic.

They reached an intersection, and she paused, raising her hand. Men marched along the street.

"What do you think they're doing?" Eva whispered.

They were soldiers. She could hear it from the clump of their boots across the cobblestones, along with the sound of their mail jostling with each step. "Maybe heading back to Herenth."

The capital city was far enough away that the soldiers would not be able to walk the entire journey. They would go by horseback, though why would they be marching through the city at this time? This was a more sizable contingent than she had seen before. Thankfully, the soldiers barely paid any attention to them, not even looking in their direction.

At least, most of them didn't look in their direction. One of the soldiers did glance toward them. He had a hood covering his head, and there was something dark and dangerous that seemed to emanate from him, making Jayna a bit uncomfortable.

Not a soldier.

She didn't *feel* magic from him, but couldn't be certain.

She stayed in the shadows behind them, pushing the cart backward. She was limited in how far she could move away, but wanted to avoid his attention.

"Who is he?" Eva whispered.

"I don't know."

She watched, tracing her finger along the dragon stone ring, until the contingent moved past, disappearing into the distance.

She let out a relieved sigh.

"Do you think it was a sorcerer?" Eva asked.

"I couldn't tell anything," Jayna said. "Let's keep moving. I don't want to get caught out here if they decide to circle back around."

And she wanted to get this man help as quickly as she could to learn whatever answers he might have.

"It's early for soldiers to be out marching."

"When it comes to the king and his soldiers, maybe the time of day matters."

"It's still early," Eva muttered.

Jayna bit back the comment she wanted to make. She almost snapped at Eva, telling her that she would have been up drinking wine all night were it not for the man's arrival.

The soldiers marched along the main road, and given the direction they were moving, it did look like they were heading out of the city itself. Strangely, they weren't heading toward Herenth. They were marching off to the west, and there wasn't anything there other than El'aras-controlled lands. Those were far enough away that they wouldn't travel there and risking the danger of *that* kind of magic.

Jayna tore her gaze away, dragging the cart along the main road. It was the only way she knew how to reach the Academy outpost on the outskirts of the city where she could find Char, an old classmate of hers, and someone she

had once been incredibly close to. Now they were acquaintances, if that.

As they neared the end of the road, passing by a series of darkened buildings with little more than faded streetlights illuminating their path, she motioned for Eva to help guide the wagon off to the side. The cart bounced once, and for the first time since leaving their home, the man moaned softly. Jayna took that as a reassuring sign, but then he fell silent again. The sweat coating his brow seemed even thicker than before. She really had to hurry.

"How much farther is it?" Eva grumbled.

Jayna shook her head. "Not much."

They dragged the cart along the street, dealing with the jostling of the cobblestones, and the streetlights began to brighten the farther they went. In this part of the city, they grew ever nearer to more wealth. The homes had larger lawns and open space between buildings, with towering walls surrounding them. Most of the walls were made of stone, though some were constructed out of wood as well—a simple barricade more than true protection.

In the distance, she caught sight of the Academy outpost. It was a small building, and mostly darkened. She slowed as she approached.

Eva looked over to her. "You don't have to go if you don't want to," Eva said.

"I know that I don't have to," she said. "But at the same time . . ." She looked down at the man. Char would have access to resources she simply didn't. She didn't like the idea of leaving someone to suffer, and until she knew what was wrong with the stranger, she didn't feel as if she could simply abandon him. It was obvious that something was wrong with him, even if she weren't able to detect it with her own use of magic.

"You could use your own power," Eva suggested.

Jayna looked over, having noticed the slight accusation in her tone. It stemmed from what Eva had attempted. She

had dared use her power, though there wasn't the same risk in her doing so. As far as Jayna knew, there wasn't any way of detecting the kind of power Eva had commanded. Hers was a strange sort of blood magic, something drastically different from sorcerers' magic, and not the kind of thing that the Sorcerers' Society would be able to detect. However, using sorcerers' magic outside the Society was another matter—that, they *could* detect.

"It's about more than just what I can do," Jayna said.

"Is it?" Eva asked.

"Yes," Jayna said.

She pulled the cart along with her, and ignored the pointed look Eva threw her. It surprised her that Eva managed to hold such accusation in her gaze, given how much she drank, but she'd always managed to cut down to the heart of the matter. It was almost as if she knew Jayna's thoughts.

As they neared the outpost, Jayna continued to drag the cart, along with Eva's help, off to a shadowed section along the wall.

"Wait here."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see if Char will help."

"What if he's not willing to? Or what if he's not even there?"

Jayna squeezed her eyes shut. "He's there."

One of the very first things the two of them had done when learning their magic was test a linking spell. In doing so, she always knew how to find Char, much like he would probably always know how to find her. Despite that, he had never come looking for her. Maybe he had given her space, or maybe he had lost the ability to track the linking spell. Either way, she appreciated that he hadn't searched for her, and that he hadn't betrayed her to the Sorcerers' Society. Not that she would've expected Char to do so.

She slipped along the street, staying near the wall, and ducked through the opening in the gate before reaching the stone building. The stone was different than it was in the western part, not slick with moisture, but also not the same dark gray, almost black stone. This was a pale white, though seemed to have been scrubbed free of moss but still seemed to gleam in the darkness, enough that she could pick out the texture of the stone itself. It was the only building constructed like that in this part of the city.

She traced her fingers along it, feeling for gaps between the stones, but there were none—sorcery, and the kind of power that was simply a demonstration of magic more than anything useful. It was designed to remind those who came here of the power of the Sorcerers' Society.

Jayna squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, focusing on the linking spell. It was a distant sense of energy buried within her. She could pick up on the texture of that spell, like a band that stretched through her mind and away. As she focused upon it, she used that to call it forth, drawing on that energy and that connection to Char so she could find him.

He was here. He was nearby. She knew that.

She continued to focus on that energy, letting it guide her around the outskirts of the building until she came to a small window near the back. This was where the tracking spell had led her. She paused, testing the linking spell again, and made sure that it had truly guided her here. When she was satisfied that it did, she stepped up on her toes, pulling herself up and peering through the window. A soft glowing light radiated from inside.

She looked around the room. It was small, about the size of her own bedroom, though much neater. A narrow bed ran along one wall, and a desk rested opposite it. A lantern sat on top of the desk, the glowing light coming from it. The lantern was nothing like the kind she used. It didn't require oil, and was little more than a glowing orb. More sorcery. A

stack of books rested on the desk, and she could see the back of a man leaning over the desk, resting on his elbows.

It had been a long time since she had seen Char. The better part of a year.

The linking spell had bound them together, so that even when she had been apart from him, she had still been aware of him, a presence in her mind that told her where to find him. First in the Academy, then later when he'd come to Nelar. That had been part of her reluctance in coming to the city. Facing Char was harder than she'd expected.

There were no others in the room with him.

Now was her chance.

She tapped on the window.

Char jerked up, then he looked down at his book, starting to read again and ignoring the sudden sound on the window.

He was always the studious one of the two of them. Jayna had been more focused on power, drawing upon natural ability, never wanting to study quite as much as Char, though she had used his interest in studying to help her advance. He had used her raw power to progress as well. The combination of their talents had made both of them better, at least in the time she had been in the Academy.

Jayna smiled to herself. She tapped on the window again.

This time, the sound drew the desired attention. He jerked his head toward the window and stared, frowning, before carrying the glowing orb over to it. As he held it up, Jayna kept herself pulled upward so she could look in at him. His eyes widened.

Char had shaggy dark hair, a strong chin, and normally wore a quick, lopsided smile. She'd always found him handsome, in his own unique way. None of that had changed in the year since she had last seen him.

"Jayna?" he mouthed.

The window was thick enough that she couldn't hear anything.

She nodded, holding herself on one hand, and motioned toward the front of the outpost. Char frowned for a moment before nodding. He headed to the door, which suggested he at least understood what she was getting at. Jayna released her grip on the windowsill, dropping back to the ground, and hurried around the front of the outpost. She reached it as Char pulled the door open and frowned at her.

"What are you doing here?"

"I need your help."

He looked along the street and up to the sky before turning back to her. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Not really. Do you?"

"No. It's either really late, or it's really early. Either way, you shouldn't be here."

"I need your help," Jayna repeated.

He looked around before turning his attention back to her. "Just like that? I haven't seen you in the better part of a year, then you show up here and ask for my help?"

"It's not for me. There's a man who needs help."

Char eyed her suspiciously. "What kind of man?"

"Somebody who came to me for help."

He stared at her, saying nothing.

Jayna shook her head. "Would you just give me a hand, Char? Then I'll get out of your hair."

He glanced behind before breathing out slowly. "I really should get Master Agnew."

"You don't need any master to help you with this," she said. "I just need you, Char." She headed along the cobblestone path leading to the road, and Char followed.

When he reached the street and saw the cart, his eyes widened. "What did you do?"

"Help me with him," she said.

Eva stayed hidden in the shadows, and though Jayna partly appreciated that, she also wished that Eva would step forward so that her presence didn't seem so odd.

"Who is he?" Char asked, leaning over the edge of the wagon. He ran his hands along the man's legs and arms, reaching his chest, and jerked his hand back when he touched it. "Something's off. I really *should* get Master Agnew."

Jayna glanced into the darkness toward Eva. Could it be her magic that he detected? She wouldn't have thought so.

"Don't. Please." She hated begging, but Char had to know. "I don't know what happened to him. He just ended up on my doorstep."

"Your doorstep? You're here in Nelar?"

She sighed. "I figured you would have known that with the linking spell."

"I haven't felt anything through the linking spell. Not for a long time. Not since you disappeared."

Jayna fingered the dragon stone ring. Could she have broken the linking spell by taking up service as a Toral? She wouldn't have thought so, but maybe she had. It didn't quite fit with what she knew though. She could still feel the power between them, and she still recognized the connection. If nothing else, she would've expected not to feel him any longer if the linking spell were to have been disrupted.

"I can still feel it," she said softly.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Can we talk about that later? This man needs our help. *Your* help." When he glanced back toward the outpost as if he were going to get Master Agnew, she added one more plea. "Please, Char."

Char watched her for a long moment before nodding. "I'll help, but once we get through this, you are going to answer my questions."

She let out a relieved sigh. "I'll answer your questions. After."

He helped Jayna grab the man, dragging him off the cart. Jayna looked past him, into the darkness where Eva

remained hidden.

Why wasn't she coming out?

As they dragged the man forward, she looked over to Eva, but she shook her head, staying near the cart. She made a motion, pointing at the cart.

Did she fear the Sorcerers' Society? Eva had never said so, but it would make sense if it were true. Many people, especially those with power as Eva obviously possessed, feared the Sorcerers' Society.

Char turned toward her, and Jayna forced a smile. She avoided looking over at Eva again, not wanting to draw the attention to her friend if she didn't want any of the Sorcerers' Society to notice her. Maybe it was for the best.

He didn't say anything for a few long moments, which left her unsettled.

"I know I agreed to help, but I've never had to help out in a situation like this before," he said.

She shrugged. "Maybe not quite like this, but we used to work well together."

"Until you left," he said.

"Until I left," she agreed.

They carried the man to the front of the building. He was heavy, and Jayna was tired, her leg throbbing, forcing her to limp. Char frowned at her.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded hurriedly. "I'm fine. I'm just a little tired."

"Maybe because it's the middle of the night and you came to me with some injured man and you don't want to explain what happened."

"Maybe," she said, forcing another smile.

He paused in front of the door. "You're going to have to be quiet inside. If I get caught helping you like this . . ."

"I don't want you to help if it will get you into trouble."

"I wouldn't let that happen," Char said.

Jayna didn't like it, but she had to be prepared for the possibility that Char would turn her in. Here was someone

who should *help* her. But then, she had been the one to disappear.

"I have issues with Master Agnew trusting me as it is. If he sees I'm sneaking people in after hours, he might decide I'm too much trouble. Not everybody wants to leave the Academy, Jayna."

"You've already graduated from the Academy," she said softly.

"Graduated, but I'm still in my training. You and I both know that once you finish with the Academy, you're never *really* finished."

He propped the man up on one leg and pushed open the door, poking his head through for a moment, sweeping his gaze around before turning back to her and nodding. They dragged the man inside.

Jayna had never been in the outpost before, though she knew it was here. Anyone who lived in the city knew that the Sorcerers' Society had an outpost within Nelar, though gaining access to it was a difficult matter. The walls were all of the same smooth white stone that seemed to glow. The air smelled of spice and mint, perhaps, or maybe even rose, though she couldn't tell for sure. There was an energy in the air, something she remembered from her time within the Academy—a time where she had felt magic used all around her. Now it only seemed to serve as a reminder of what she no longer did, and what she could no longer be.

She twisted the dragon stone ring on her finger. Char glanced in her direction, as if he were aware of her thoughts. She forced a smile, motioning for him to keep going.

They headed along a narrow hallway off the main foyer. Portraits hung on the wall, ancient sorcerers who had once served the Academy. She noticed more of the strange glowing orbs, set into the floor, illuminating the path, though with a dim and comfortable light, nothing nearly as bright as what Char had in his room. When they reached a

door about halfway down the hall, Char pushed it open, poking his head inside and glancing around before turning back to her and nodding. "In here."

She followed him inside.

The room was expansive. Larger than she would've expected, and probably larger than it needed to be. There were no windows. It occurred to her that none of the rooms on the front side of the outpost had any windows, and that was where they had gone.

A large bed occupied most of the room, and Char guided her over to it, pushing the man up onto it. When he was situated, she looked around. A row of cabinets occupied the opposite wall, with a counter running below them. A bowl with incense sat on the counter, and Char held his hands over it, murmuring something softly before the incense started burning.

"You care to tell me what happened?"

"I don't even know. He showed up at my door."

"He just showed up?"

"That's what I said."

"Why would a man just show up at your door like that?"

Jayna wasn't sure how to answer. Char still served the Academy, and he was still connected to the Sorcerers' Society, much more so than her. He might want to keep her secrets, but she also worried he wouldn't. She worried that, in time, he would need to betray her, not because he wanted to, but because he didn't have much choice in the matter. He needed to keep his position within the Academy safe.

"Let's just say he probably heard I might be able to help." When he frowned, she nodded. "Can you help him?"

"If I can't, then Master Agnew would be more than happy to help."

"If you need to get him, I can't stay here."

"Jayna—"

"I can't stay here any longer," she said. "I can't explain it, so don't push me on it, but just know that if you can help him, then I would appreciate it."

He watched her for a long moment before finally shaking his head. "You can still be incredibly frustrating, do you know that?"

"I know."

He pulled open one of the cabinets and started sorting through it, pulling out various items. He grabbed a small cylindrical object that he carried over and rested on the man's chest. He cupped his hands on either side of it, and Jayna could feel the power building from within Char, pressing through the enchantment that augmented his healing magic, then radiating out into the man.

"What are you doing?"

"You know exactly what I'm doing. I don't need to walk you through basic healing enchantments."

"It's been a while."

"It's more than just the time you've been away," he said.

"I've never used an enchantment like that," she said.

"Well, this one isn't particularly exciting. A general healing enchantment. Master Agnew made it. He's made most of the enchantments within the outpost. He's been treating people a long time, you know."

"I don't know."

Char glanced back at her. "Maybe you don't. He's one of the most skilled healers, Jayna."

"It's no wonder he chose you to work with him, then."

"It was competitive," he said.

"I'm sure it was."

"Are you mocking me?"

She shook her head. "I'm not mocking," she said. "You were one of the most gifted students at the Academy."

"You could have been too," Char said.

"I never liked to apply myself."

"You'd rather go and spend time in taverns. You always preferred that."

She shrugged. "Can you blame me?"

"You're too much like your brother."

She fell silent, and Char glanced over to her. "What?"

"Nothing."

Char watched her for a few moments, continuing to pour power through the enchantment before stepping back, picking it up off the man's chest, and carrying it back to the cabinet. He reached for a few other enchantments and brought those to the bed, where he set them down. He tried one after the other, but none of them did anything.

Char leaned back after attempting three more, shaking his head. "I don't know what to tell you." He glanced toward the door, and she could imagine him going to get Master Agnew for help. That would lead to the kind of questions she didn't want. "None of these really work all that well."

The man started to tremble, his entire body contorting. His eyes went wide, though his lids fluttered. Everything within him started to shake. Worse, there came a strange hissing sound from deep inside of him. It was an unpleasant sort of sound, something that grated upon her, as if it were claws pulling across stone.

It was the sound of death.

Char hurriedly grabbed a couple of different enchantments—each of them a different material, a different shape, and filled with a different magic that echoed against her—and squeezed them down on top of the man. Shadows poured out of him. Dark power.

The dragon stone ring constricted around her finger, causing it to throb.

She already knew Char wasn't going to be able to do anything. Even Master Agnew might not be able to do anything.

"Step off to the side," she whispered.

"What?"

She twisted the stone ring on her finger. "Step off to the side."

"What are you going to do?"

"The only thing that will save him."

SHE PRESSED HER HANDS DOWN ON THE MAN'S CHEST, FOCUSING deep within her. He still trembled, and she started to wonder how long he had before whatever affected him consumed him.

The dragon stone ring constricted again. Her finger throbbed.

Dark magic.

She should have known this before. Then she wouldn't have bothered coming to Char. While it was good to see him, she didn't like the questions her visit raised, and didn't care for the way he looked at her with hurt in his eyes.

"Jayna?" Char asked.

She studied the man. "I should have seen it before."

She needed Eva for this. It would be easier.

"You should've seen what?"

She shook her head, twisting the stone ring on her finger. It had started to hurt—badly enough that whatever was here would be powerful.

She clenched her jaw, trying to fight through the pain.

"Dark magic."

Char's eyes widened. "If there's dark magic, then I *need* to go to Master Agnew."

Jayna shook her head. "He's not going to be able to do anything."

"You don't know that. We have enchantments—"

"No enchantment is going to be able to remove dark magic."

Dark magic required incredible skill to control, and even more incredible skill to remove—unless you had the right kind of power. There were precious few sorcerers even within the Academy who would've been able to peel off dark magic.

"What are you doing?" Char asked as she pressed her hands down upon the man.

"I'm going to save him."

Char started to laugh, though it faded as she forced her hands down on the man's chest and began to push power out through the dragon stone ring.

Pain flared in her the way it did each time she used the ring.

It started in her finger, then built up her arm.

It was almost enough to stop her from using it.

But the man had come to her for a reason—and she needed to know why.

Power built within her, and she ignored Char as he shot her a look. She didn't know how to explain what she was doing, and she certainly didn't want to answer any questions about the kind of magic she was pulling on. Not until she had a better handle on it herself.

"Jayna?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "I need you to back away."

"I don't know what you're doing, or what you have learned in the time you've been away . . . Wait. What is that?" She could feel his gaze lingering on the dragon stone ring. "Do you know what that is?" Char whispered.

"I know. Do you?"

He shook his head. She would have been surprised if he'd have learned about Toral magic. "That's not the kind of

magic you learned at the Academy.”

“It’s not.”

Char leaned close to her. She could feel the warmth of his body, smell the hint of pine in the soap he used, and sense the familiarity of him.

“That’s dark magic,” he said.

“It will take dark magic to remove dark magic.”

Char leaned away. “What were you thinking?”

“I told you I will explain later.” She pressed outward, using the dragon stone ring like an enchantment. There was a connection inside of the man, and then a strange writhing somewhere deep in him. It distracted from the cold pain of using the ring. “Shit,” she muttered. “There is something here. I can feel it, but . . .”

Every time she tried to use the dragon stone power, pressing it into the man, wrapping it through him, she found it failing. It was almost as if the energy within him resisted her.

The door thundered open, and she glanced back, suddenly worried that it was Master Agnew. Instead, Eva stood there.

Eva pressed up against Jayna’s shoulder. “I felt it,” she whispered.

“You could feel it *outside*?” Jayna asked.

“This is dangerous, Jayna. This creature shouldn’t be here in the city.”

She locked eyes with Eva for a moment. There were times when it seemed like she remembered her past, but others when she was a blank slate.

“What are you talking about?” Char asked, glancing from Jayna to Eva. “Who is she?”

Eva closed the door to the room while Jayna kept her hand pressed upon the man’s chest, and could feel something shifting and moving, a strange energy within him.

"Is it a spell?" she asked. "It doesn't feel quite like any spell I've ever encountered before, but it also doesn't feel quite natural."

"Tell me what you detect," Eva said.

Char took a spot next to Eva, looking over at her. "Who are you?"

"Later," Jayna said.

"What do you feel?" Eva asked.

Eva held her hands above the man next to Jayna, and on a finger on each of her hands she now wore a band of interconnected silver, with a separate piece that wrapped down to her palm. It was an enchantment Jayna had never seen her use before.

"Well, as I press through him, I can feel the power starting to swirl inside him, as if it's moving around." She concentrated, holding her hands in place, focusing on the energy she detected.

"Could it be a siphon spell?" Char asked.

"I don't think this is a spell," Jayna said. "I'm not exactly sure what it is, but . . ."

She wasn't sure, but the more she pushed, probing for the energy that came from within this darkness, the more certain she was that it wasn't any sort of spell.

"It's almost as if it's . . ."

"Alive," Eva said, hands still on him. "Describe what you're feeling."

Jayna closed her eyes, and she continued to pour more power out through the dragon stone ring, using it as an enchantment to augment her natural abilities. The dragon stone held the power of the Toral, and the dragon stone was the mark of a Toral, a connection to an ancient power she didn't fully understand.

"It's insubstantial," Jayna started. "Every time I push power out into him, I can feel it starting to coalesce, but then this energy within him starts to shift. It slides around within him, though it seems focused within his chest."

"Only within his chest?" Eva asked.

Jayna glanced over to her, then turned her attention back to the man and closed her eyes again. It was easier to focus on the power within him with her eyes closed, far easier than keeping them open as she continued to press energy down into him. "It's mostly in his chest, but . . ." She shook her head. "No. Not only in his chest. There's a strand of it that's working up into his mind."

Jayna pushed even more power into, following it up through his chest, into his neck, and then surrounding his mind. By pressing farther in through him, she felt an explosion of power against her.

"Oh," she muttered.

"What?" Char asked.

"It's wrapped around his mind. The rest of it streaks out from there."

"That is what I feared," Eva said. "It's probably a dwaring. It's a creature of darkness. A creature of danger."

Jayna had chased dangerous creatures in her time working with Ceran, but hadn't heard of a dwaring. When this was done, she'd *definitely* need to call Ceran.

"If it's a creature, I might have an enchantment that will work," Char said.

"No enchantment will hold a dwaring." Eva's face looked troubled.

How much did she remember about these creatures—and how much of what she knew had holes in it?

"What can you tell me?" Jayna prompted.

Eva shook her head. "They should have been expelled from these lands long ago."

"How would it be here?"

Eva shook her head. "I don't know."

"What do I need to do?"

"You have to wrap your magic around it. All of it. Once you do, then you can compress it. It will fight, but if you can separate it from what it's feeding on, you should be able to

weaken it. You will need to be prepared for it to fight incredibly hard, and know that only then might it loosen up enough."

"Once it's loose, what do I need to do?"

"We need to have a place to put it," she said.

"Do you have anything?" Jayna looked over to Char, and found him frowning at her, though he didn't say anything. He simply stared, glancing from Jayna to Eva, before turning his attention to the man.

"You're asking if I have something to hold dark magic? This is an Academy outpost, Jayna. This isn't some sort of dark magic stronghold."

"I understand," she said. "But as a Sorcerers' Society outpost, there's probably something here that could contain dark magic."

And more than that, it was probably the best place for them to have come, especially given the uncertainty about what was going on. Jayna wouldn't have been able to trap the dwarding on her own. She might not even have known to go searching for it. She'd have to think about why the man had ended up on her doorstep later.

"Let me see what I can find."

"You're going to have to make it," Eva said.

"I'm going to have to *what*?"

"Make an enchantment," Eva said, turning her attention back to the man, and holding her hands out on either side of him. It was almost as if she were trying to contain the possible escape of the dwarding, though Jayna couldn't detect any power coming off of her. Yet.

"I'm not able to make any enchantments that quickly," Char said.

"You know how to do it," Jayna said. She had been there when he had learned. And given his experience and knowledge, he was far better equipped to create an enchantment like that than she was. She might be able to come up with some way of using an enchantment, but

making one was a very different thing. She definitely didn't have that skill. She didn't have the need either.

Enchantments were typically created by those who didn't have complete control over magic, and used by those who had none. The making of enchantments was taught at a later stage within the Academy, but now that Char had finished his training, he would have learned the technique.

"I know how to do it, but what you're asking is for me to create an enchantment to contain dark magic."

"It's not to contain dark magic," Eva said. "It's to contain a dark creature. It's a different thing. Do you know how to create an enchantment to hold wild creatures?"

"Of course," Char said.

"Then do the same, but add in protections that can prevent dark magic from entering—or exiting."

"I can't just do that," Char said.

"You can, you just don't want to," Jayna said.

"Did you come here knowing what this was?"

Jayna looked over to Char. "If I had known what this was, I wouldn't have brought him here."

"Where would you have brought him?"

She let out a long sigh. "Not here."

They didn't have much time. She could feel the dawning starting to constrict. It was pressing in upon the man's mind, and the longer she left it alone, the more likely it was that it would continue to squeeze.

Once it finished, she suspected the man would be gone.

"What happens when it finishes feeding?" Jayna asked.

"I don't remember everything about them, but I know it moves on," Eva said.

"To a new host?"

"To a new host, and from there . . ."

"What?" she asked.

Eva closed her eyes. Smoke circled her the way it did when she tried to concentrate. "Eventually, it will break free." Her voice came from a distance. "This is a juvenile

dwaring," she said. "I have never seen one, but then, I've never seen a fully grown one either."

"How do you know about it?" Char asked.

"Can you make the enchantment or not?" Jayna asked.

He frowned, glancing from her to Eva, before turning to the counter. He started working, muttering under his breath, but hopefully doing what Eva suggested.

"How would a creature like this get here?"

"I don't know," Eva said. "A creature like this should not be here. Others have protected against beings like this spreading outside of their natural habitats."

She looked over to Eva, waiting for her to explain, but she didn't. It was one more question she had about the woman, one more thing that went into the mystery of Eva, and one more thing she doubted she would ever get an answer to. Not that she could push Eva too much. There were things she claimed not to remember, and given the damaged way she had been when Jayna had come across her, she couldn't blame her for some uncertainty.

"It's done. At least, as much as I can do," Char said.

"Hold it over him," Eva said.

Char stepped toward her, but then hesitated.

"Char? What are you doing? You said you would help. He's *dying*!"

"You said this is dark magic." He glanced toward the door, then to the still convulsing man with the dwarfing writhing within him. "I'm going to get myself in trouble. If you want me to put my neck out, you need to tell me what happened when you left, or I'll destroy this right now."

JAYNA SHARED A LOOK WITH EVA.

The man spasmed. The power inside of him was almost more than she could withstand, though she had it controlled using the power of the ring—for now.

“Please,” she whispered. “Let’s trap this, then I’ll tell you.”

Char watched her, but didn’t hand over the enchantment. “How long can you hold it?” he asked. “I can get Master Agnew. We can do this another way if you’d prefer.”

She clenched her jaw for a moment. This was a side of Char she hadn't seen before. Shouldn't he want to help? The man was dying, and he was holding something back from her out of spite.

He still watched her.

“I bonded to a Sul'toral as his Toral, took on this ring so he could lend me some of his power” she said, waving her hand toward him irritably, “and have been fighting dark creatures in the year since I left the Academy. I will tell you more when you hand over the enchantment.”

The pain in her hand was becoming incredibly intense.

It didn't matter how much power she drew through the ring. The duration also made a difference. And now it was

starting to creep up her forearm, a cold, burning sort of pain. She wasn't going to be able to withstand it much longer. When she lost control . . .

No. She would not lose control.

She held Char's gaze, forcing him to meet her eyes.

Finally, he relented.

Jayna started to focus on the power buried within the man. She squeezed. She poured energy out from her, down through his mind, through his chest, and out through his legs. She used the energy of the dragon stone ring, summoning the dangerous power it commanded, and let that flow out from her, into him, and beyond. As she connected to that power, holding on to that energy, she could feel the dwarding starting to fight. It wriggled beneath her power, and the more she constricted, the more the dwarding attempted to struggle free.

Jayna had to focus.

"Can you help?" she asked Eva.

"Not with this."

"But you're standing there—"

"Not like this," Eva said.

Jayna glanced over to Char before turning her attention back to Eva and nodding.

"I almost have it."

She continued squeezing, pulling on the power that worked within the man, and then started to constrict it. It was the wrapping of power around his mind that had been the most difficult. That involved stretching beyond what she was normally comfortable doing, and straining with far more power than what she normally possessed. Once she did that, though, she could press outward even more, and she could push that energy from her, wrapping it outward in a way that allowed it to drift out and around, squeezing the power from inside the man. The dwarding continued to fight as she constricted, wiggling against her; gradually,

that wiggling turned into something more: a thrashing as it battered against her.

"Keep going," Eva said.

"I'm trying," she muttered. "It's not easy."

The dward continued to fight her, and Jayna struggled against it, squeezing down. She found herself drawing on all the energy within her, and pushing as much as she could through the dragon stone ring, but even with that, she didn't have enough power to combat what was happening. She continued pushing, letting more and more power out from her, and suddenly tapped into something different.

She almost stopped.

"Keep going," Eva whispered.

The power she detected from the ring was larger than anything she had ever accessed before. It terrified her, mostly because it sat on the fringes of her awareness, a vast emptiness, a reach of power unlike anything she had experienced, a great, dark kind of energy that left her troubled. Still, it provided her with more than what she had on her own, and she used it.

She squeezed, suddenly empowered, emboldened by what she had drawn upon, and she pressed inward, constricting that power around the dward. As she did, she could feel it shrinking within the man, and she dragged it away from his mind and up from his legs, then concentrated in his chest. It seemed the right place for her to focus on. When she was done, she started to pull.

The enchantment Char had fabricated was a circular container made from an old silver pan he'd taken from a cabinet. There were shapes worked around the metal—shapes that appeared as he forced the magic of the spell into the enchantment—and hopefully they would be enough to contain the dward. She dragged the dward out of the man and squeezed it into the enchantment, forcing it down into the confines of the enchanted container itself. As she

did, the dwarfing started to fight, but even that fighting began to fade once it realized it couldn't get free.

"Now what?" Char asked.

Jayna looked down at the man. His breathing had eased, there was less sweat dripping from his brow than there had been before, and thankfully, he no longer trembled, but she could tell he remained sick. "Now we wait."

Eva took the enchantment from her, pressing her hands onto either side of it. A soft smoke swirled around it, and if she hadn't been looking for it, Jayna doubted she would've even noticed it. As it was, she could feel a faint tracing of power from her, though it didn't seem as if Char were aware of what Eva had done.

"Why don't you tell me more about what happened after you left?" Char asked.

She didn't know what he'd do if she didn't, but at this point, she didn't want to risk it. Jayna took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She glanced over to Eva, who continued cupping the enchantment. The smoke swirling around it left her wondering exactly what Eva was doing, but she suspected she had added her own unique connection to it. The enchantment now carried not only a sorcerer's touch and a Toral's, but whatever it was Eva happened to be.

A part of Jayna wondered if that were even enough to contain the dwarfing. She had felt its power pressing against her. Had she not had access to that strange, vast, empty, dark power through the ring, she might not have had enough strength to withstand it.

Eva looked at her, a darkness in her eyes for a moment, but then it faded. She tipped her head toward Char. "I'm going to take this outside."

Jayna nodded slowly. "I will be there soon."

Eva smiled tightly a moment, then headed out the door.

"Who is she?" Char asked after she left, leaning on the table. He didn't look down at the man, though his breathing

had eased, and he didn't look as if he suffered in the same way he had when they'd brought him in.

Jayna shook her head. "I came across her shortly after I left the Academy. She was injured. Nearly dying. I helped her."

Char arched a brow at her. "*You* helped her?"

"I'm not without my own abilities," she said.

"I never said you were."

"You were hinting at it," she said.

"I was hinting at nothing."

Jayna took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before turning her attention back to him. "I suppose I don't even know. She's been staying with me." Jayna let out a heavy sigh. "Do you have any place I can sit?"

He pulled open the door, stepping out into the hall for a moment before returning with two stools and sliding one over to her. "Sit. You're not done talking."

Jayna sank into the stool, resting her elbows on the table next to the still-unconscious man, sweeping her gaze over him. Her Academy training told her his breathing was regular. She checked the artery in his neck to make sure his circulation was still good, and she noticed the sweat that had been streaming from him had also lessened. He was no longer burning up the way he had been either, so she suspected that was good. These were all signs of improvement, though she didn't know if he would continue to improve, or how long he would be unconscious. Maybe she would need to leave him here with Char, and let the sorcerers continue their healing. Now that she had removed the dwearring, she didn't have to worry about anything else keeping him from recovering.

"I told you what I've been doing and where we've traveled, but not why." She held his gaze. "I've been looking for my brother."

"Jonathan? That's what this is about?"

She looked at Char. That might be easier for him to understand. "That's why I left the Academy," she said softly, looking over at the man. She wasn't able to meet Char's eyes. "I thought he'd just taken some job. He did that from time to time, you know." Char was one of the few people who knew what kind of man her brother was. Of course, *Jayna* wasn't even sure what kind of man her brother was. He got involved in dangerous work, stealing items of power, but he had never managed to be gone this long before. He had never disappeared like this from her, leaving her without any sign of where he could be found. "I didn't know what happened to him."

"He didn't even like you studying at the Academy. Why did you even care?"

She turned and looked at Char. "He's all I had. You know what happened to my parents."

"Not really," Char said. "You only told me they disappeared."

"Not disappeared. They were killed." And by a dark power that she wanted to better understand. This wasn't *only* about finding Jonathan. It was about understanding the power that had taken her parents. "Jonathan took care of me."

"By stealing."

"By stealing." She nodded. "I didn't say I approved of it, only that he took care of me." She squeezed her eyes shut. It had been a source of contention between them. Jonathan had always been smart, and she often claimed he was smarter than her, which he tried to refute. She might be book smart, but Jonathan was clever. A planner. He had a way of anticipating things that she simply could not. "He's never left me for this long before. He's never disappeared completely without sending word."

"I hate to say it, Jayna, but you know what might've happened."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I keep hearing word of him crop up from time to time, even if he's never around."

"What sort of word do you hear of him?" Char asked.

"I hear snippets from people who had worked with him. Members of his team. They don't know what happened to him either, but I know he's not dead."

"If he's not dead, then it should be pretty easy to find him."

"You would think so, but . . ." She breathed out a sigh of frustration. "I've been searching this entire year, and only recently have I heard anything useful. Friends of his described somebody who worked with him. I've been chasing that information." She almost mentioned the symbol she'd seen in the tavern, but didn't. It was the first *new* information about Jonathan that she'd had in a while. "You remember the kind. Thieves," she said.

"I see," he said.

"I know something could've happened to him. I'm not naïve. I understand the work my brother does, but I also understand just how capable he is. He wouldn't just disappear. Not after the letter he sent me."

"What letter?"

"He sent a letter that suggested he was going to take care of us. That he was finally nearing the end of taking jobs." And there was the symbol she now knew tied to dark sorcerers.

"That's why you disappeared?"

"I had a feeling he needed help," Jayna said.

"A feeling?"

"I went to the others who worked with him." That had been the first thing she had done. She had gone to men she had known for most of her life, men she had known to be thieves and worse, men who had adored her brother, or so she had thought. "I asked them if they would help."

"Let me guess. They weren't willing to do it."

Jayna shrugged. "Not entirely."

"Not entirely. Were you surprised that a group of thieves and criminals and whatever else they were didn't want to help your brother?"

"There is *some* loyalty among thieves," she said.

Char leaned back in the stool, and nearly tipped off of it, before leaning forward and shaking his head. "There is no loyalty among thieves. That's why they're thieves. They're willing to steal and cheat and—"

"And each person depends upon the other. Their lives depend upon a willingness to work together. They don't simply abandon each other when things go wrong." She shook her head. "Especially not Matthew. He's worked with my brother for as long as I can remember. He has a particular set of skills Jonathan always valued, and I figured if anybody would know anything about Jonathan, it would be Matthew, but he refused to share anything with me. It was almost as if he were upset."

"Maybe he was upset that you came asking him about your brother."

Jayna shook her head again. She wasn't entirely sure. She had given it much thought, enough to recognize that Matthew wouldn't have abandoned Jonathan in that way, but something had changed between them.

"Anyway, that's why I left."

"You thought you could do more for your brother outside of the Academy than within it?"

Jayna looked around the inside of the room. It was a large healing room, with the cabinets and the counter and the bed, a windowless room with the pale white walls that gleamed with the glowing lamps situated on either side. Still, there was something quite confining about it.

Had she stayed at the Academy, she would've done something similar to what Char had done. She would have finally graduated the Academy, but she would've continued

her training, focusing on one area of magic with a master sorcerer, learning even more about her powers.

There was value in it. There was a time when that was all she had wanted to do. Not chasing power for the sake of power, though she couldn't help but feel the appeal of learning more, trying to understand what else she might be able to do with it. That desire had been more about exploring the connection that magic had within the world. There was something so natural about it, something that her brother had never understood.

As Char had said, her brother had not approved of her use of magic. He had come around much less often once she had joined the Academy, though he still visited once in a while. She had looked forward to those letters, to the occasional communications with her brother. Each time he sent a letter, he included details about the kind of job he intended to take, and which rich target he'd chosen. Up until the last one. It was almost as if she were included in the planning of his jobs, as if Jonathan wanted to bring her along with him.

Were it not for her entry into the Academy, she might have joined him. Maybe that was why he didn't like her learning magic. Maybe Jonathan had wanted her to work with him. He claimed that he needed someone smart, someone he could trust, but he never claimed that he needed her.

"You left."

She looked over to Char. There was real hurt in his voice.

"I couldn't help him from inside the Academy," she said.

"My grandparents came. They wanted to meet you. It was supposed to be a time of celebration. Do you realize I was going to be the first one in my family to graduate from the Academy?"

"I know, Char."

"Given what happened to my parents, I . . ." She reached over, taking his hands, and he stiffened. "You didn't tell me

what was going on either.”

“I knew what you would think.”

His gaze drifted down to the ring on her finger. “What is that ring?”

She took a deep breath. “Something different than we learn in the Academy.”

“What did you do for it?”

“I did what I needed.”

“What you needed. What you needed to do was stay at the Academy. No—what you needed was to tell somebody at the Academy that you needed help. I’m sure there were sorcerers there who could have helped you and your brother. There were other things you could have done. You didn’t have to run off and chase the kind of power you obviously have. Dark magic.”

Jayna twisted the ring on her finger. It wasn’t dark magic, or had never fully felt like that. Painful, certainly, but that didn’t make the power it granted her dark.

It was only when trying to contain the dwarding that she had felt the dark energy in the distance around her, the only time she had felt power so different from what she usually summoned. Normally, the power she commanded was like her typical sorcerers’ magic, twisted a little bit through the dragon stone and augmented to make it more powerful.

“I did what I had to. They wouldn’t help a thief. You and I both know that.”

“We don’t know that,” he said to her.

Jayna smiled. Char always believed in the power of the Academy. He believed in the Sorcerers’ Society and the benevolence and oversight they offered, the advisory role they played throughout the land. In the time since she’d left the Academy, Jayna had started to see things a bit differently. It was something she wished she would’ve seen earlier. Of course, had she seen it earlier, she might not have ever gone to the Sorcerers’ Society in the first place,

and she might not have chased the power that she had, seeking to learn about everything she had now uncovered. Maybe she never would have learned to hold on to the magic within her. Had she not, she wouldn't have learned enough to try to help her brother.

"I know they wouldn't help a thief. Especially one like Jonathan."

"I suppose he does have something of a reputation," Char said, laughing softly.

"Something of one?"

"I don't know whether to believe the rumors about your brother or not. I mean, I've met the guy. He's interesting, all right, but one of the greatest thieves in all of the kingdom?"

"I don't know if he should hear that; it might boost his ego."

"I'm sure he's heard the rumors the same as I have."

"Rumors I'm sure Jonathan started," she said. It was exactly the kind of thing Jonathan would do. He would likely draw those rumors out, encouraging others to spread the tales of his greatness. Not that this one was untrue, though. She suspected that Jonathan was every bit the skilled thief he claimed to be.

"Maybe he started them," he said. "But a rumor like that wouldn't have the legs it did unless it were true."

Jayna sighed. "I'm really sorry. I should've come to find you before. I knew you were in Nelar the entire time I was here."

"About that," Char said. "How is it you can still feel the linking spell?"

She shrugged. "I thought you could still feel it as well. I didn't realize you didn't detect it."

He flicked his gaze to the dragon stone ring. "What happens if you take that off?"

Jayna pulled the ring off, holding it in her hand. Her finger felt almost empty without it on, though she made a point of not wearing it all the time. There weren't many

people who recognized dragon stone, but there were enough who did and they might realize who—and worse, *what*—she was.

“What about now?”

“There’s something . . .” He shook his head. “I don’t feel it quite the same way. Maybe we didn’t do the linking spell quite right.”

“You were the one to walk us through it.”

“Which is why I’m saying that maybe we didn’t do it quite right,” he said.

Jayna started to laugh. “I think if there were anybody within the Academy who would know how to create a spell and hold it effectively, it would be you, Ferencharran.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Do you have to use that name?”

“It’s your full name.”

“It’s a terrible name,” he muttered.

Jayna laughed softly. “I only say it because I know how much it drives you crazy.”

“And I appreciate that about you. I wish I had more to call you.”

“I’m sorry my name is short and boring.”

“Maybe short, but never boring.”

They fell into a comfortable silence. Jayna looked over to the man. He was breathing more slowly and regularly, though he still hadn’t come around. “I should get going. I don’t know what Eva is doing outside.”

“There’s something interesting about her,” Char said, glancing to the door where Eva had disappeared.

Jayna frowned. “Interesting?”

“Well, she *is* pretty.”

Jayna just shook her head. “I’ll make sure to pass the word on to Eva that you feel that way.”

“I’m not sure that you need to do that.”

“Why not?”

“She scares me. Just a little bit. Don’t tell her I said that though.”

Jayna chuckled and got to her feet. When she did, the man fluttered his eyes open, and he looked up at her. He started to sit up, but she pressed a hand on his shoulder.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“You’re at the sorcerers’ outpost. My name is Jayna Aguelon.”

He closed his eyes again. For a moment, Jayna thought he’d passed out again, but then he opened them. “Thank the gods. My name is Topher Brown. I’ve been looking for you.”

JAYNA LOOKED OVER TO CHAR, AND HE SHOOK HIS HEAD. HE reached into the cupboard, pulled out a few different enchantments, then carried them over and set them on the bed next to the man before using them. The enchantments glowed softly as they were activated, but nothing more than that. He worked one by one, and when he was done, he looked over to Jayna, then to Topher, and nodded. "It seems like he's well. There isn't anything more I can do for him."

"We should—"

Char held his hand up, silencing her. He headed over to the door, leaning his head up against it. "I think Master Agnew is up."

Jayna tensed.

Char let out a long sigh, shaking his head as he did. "Which means that maybe you should go." He looked over to her. "Since you're in Nelar, and you know how to find me, how about the two of us meet for ale sometime?"

Jayna forced a smile. As much as she wanted to spend time with Char, she wasn't sure it was a good idea, especially given everything he was involved in, and everything that she had been involved in herself. She missed their friendship—how could she not, especially as he had been her first and closest friend after joining the

Academy?—but she also understood how different their lives were.

Char spent his days working with the Academy and Master Agnew, learning more about sorcery, while she spent her days tracking down information about her brother, chasing dark magic, and worrying what would next be required of her as a Toral. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling she had, the desire to spend a little bit more time with him. There was a certain comfort in sitting next to him again, talking to him, and if she were honest with herself, she missed him.

"I would like that."

"I could use a drink," Topher said.

Jayna leaned forward, sniffing at him. "It smells like you already had a drink."

"I did, but not enough to get quite as sick as I did."

"You weren't just sick," she said. "You had some sort of dark creature inside of you."

She didn't want to scare him too much, especially since the dwarding had been removed, but she needed to understand a little bit more about what happened, and how he had encountered the dwarding in the first place.

"You should get going," Char said. "I really don't want to have to explain to Master Agnew why I had you and someone else here in the middle of the night without waking him. I'm supposed to run any healings I do past him."

"You're a fully trained sorcerer," Jayna said.

"Fully trained or not, I still have restrictions on my magic. You understand that's how it works. I'll be restricted until I can prove to him that I am trustworthy to use my magic more openly and freely."

"I don't even know why they would restrict you," she said. "You are one of the most gifted students to have ever come through the Academy."

He shrugged, pulling open the door a crack, and listening again. He pressed it closed, breathing out. "I think it's still all right. That doesn't change anything."

"Char—"

Char shook his head. "Just get going. And promise me we will have that drink."

"I promise." Jayna glanced at one of the cabinets. While Char had been working, she'd seen the spellbook resting there. Since leaving the Academy, she hadn't been able to find one. Given the dweaving they'd taken out of Topher, she might need to use more sorcery. Plus, it was never a bad thing to have access to more knowledge. Since the book belonged to the outpost, it wasn't like she'd be taking it from Char . . .

She slipped over to it while Char stood in the doorway, and stuffed the book quickly into her pocket, then looked over to Topher. "Do you think you can walk?"

"Walk? Why wouldn't I be able to walk?"

"I don't know. Maybe because when you came here in the first place, you were barely able to stand. You certainly were unable to talk."

Once she knew he was fully recovered, she would tell him how he had nearly destroyed her home. She might even make him clean it up a little bit. On second thought, no. That involved bringing Topher back to her home. She wanted to be done with him.

He slid off the edge of the bed and stood for a moment, wobbling slightly before catching himself. He flashed a grin. "See? I'm stronger than you give me credit for."

"You sure are. Come along, big guy," she said.

Char shot her a look as he pulled the door open. He stepped out into the hall, pulling the door closed for a moment and holding it partially shut until he must have been convinced there wasn't anyone else there. When he opened it again, he motioned for Jayna to follow.

She stepped outside into the hall. The lights were a little brighter than they had been before. Maybe that was her imagination, but . . .

“Do they grow brighter as dawn comes?”

Char nodded. “That’s how sorcery works, Jayna.”

“I’m well aware of how it works, but that kind of sorcery would be considerable.” And it would’ve been a great waste of magic in her mind, but impressive, nonetheless. She couldn’t deny that there was some benefit in having the shifting nature of power on display. A power that would grant anyone who came into the outpost a belief in and appreciation of the power of the sorcerers. Not that they really needed anyone to appreciate their power. Most people in the kingdom—and beyond the kingdom, in fact—understood the power of the sorcerers. Most had little reason to question it.

Jayna followed him along the hall, and when they reached the door, he grabbed her arm for a moment, holding on to it. “Be careful.” Char glanced past her to Topher. “I don’t know what happened to him, but I saw that magic. I don’t understand it, but I know it is significant.”

“It wasn’t magic,” Jayna said.

“Fine. It wasn’t magic, but that doesn’t change my point. It’s dangerous. I don’t know that you should get caught up in anything like that.”

She leaned forward, kissing him on the cheek. “It was really good to see you again, Char.”

She motioned for Topher to follow, and she stepped out into the street, pulling the door closed behind her. She found Eva near the cart.

“That took you long enough . . . Oh. He’s awake.”

“Eva Rekayth, this is Topher Brown.”

Topher smiled. “Hey there, Eva.”

Eva glanced over to Jayna, frowning for a moment. “He seems a little bit off. Is that just my feeling, or is he a little bit off?”

Jayna shrugged. "I don't know. If I had a dwaring inside of me, I might be a little bit off, too."

"What's a dwaring?" he asked.

Eva held up the enchantment. "A dwaring is a creature of power that siphons power off of others." She watched Topher. "Perhaps you care to tell us why it was siphoning off of you?"

"Not just why, but how," Jayna said, looking over to the Academy outpost before turning to the others. "But not here. We should go someplace else."

"You said something about ale. I could take a drink."

"It's nearly morning," Jayna said.

"I could use a glass of wine," Eva said.

"Really? You too?"

Eva shrugged. "What can I say? You woke me up before I had a chance to get enough sleep."

Jayna sighed. "I suppose we don't have any food in our place, anyway, and given what he's gone through, and the magic I had to use, I need food to recover."

And they might as well humor Topher a bit. At least until she learned more.

"We should be careful with this," Eva said, holding the enchantment. "It's not exactly stable. Which means—"

"If the dwaring gets out, it's going to infect someone else."

Eva nodded. "That's sort of what it means."

Just what they needed. A possibly explosive enchantment holding dark magic that they had to hide while avoiding the Sorcerers' Society—and whoever might be responsible for this.

At one corner, Jayna thought she saw shadowed movement, and motioned for them to hurry. Eva shot her a look, holding out the enchantment.

"Someone *is* responsible for this," Jayna hissed.

"Fine, but if it breaks free again, it's your fault," she muttered.

"Let's find a place that's not so . . . populated," Jayna suggested.

They dragged the cart, and Topher walked alongside them for a little while before he stumbled and Jayna had to force him to take a seat inside. Topher protested, but she ignored it, forcing him to sit and ride.

"We already dragged your ass through the streets once, and I'd rather have you stay alert this time. I don't need you to stumble and fall and get even more injured than before." She saw more shadows moving nearby and tensed a moment until they were gone.

"You already dragged me through the street?"

"How do you think we got you over to the outpost?" Jayna asked.

"I didn't think you needed to bring me to the outpost," he said.

"Well, unfortunately I wasn't able to heal you on my own."

She ignored the way Eva looked over at her. *She* had actually been the one to heal him on her own, and perhaps by going to the Academy outpost, she had used magic in a place where it wouldn't be nearly as noticeable as it would have been otherwise. It was easy enough to deny that it came from her when she had been with Char. More than that, typically the Academy rooms were shielded so that anyone using magic wouldn't be detected by others using magic within the same building. If they were, it could cause a disruption in the magic.

It was something she would have to ask Eva about at some point. Jayna had so many questions when it came to her, and Eva had been so reluctant to share anything with her. Or unable. Jayna didn't know which it was. Both, maybe.

"Just sit down," Jayna said, giving him a hard shove. He toppled back into the cart and scooted back, looking from her to Eva.

Jayna then looked over to Eva. Her friend had a pained gaze and twisted the fabric of her dress, but she made a point of ignoring Jayna.

"We need to get away from anywhere that has a lot of people," Jayna said.

Eva shook her head. "There aren't many places open this early in the morning."

"If you're looking for a tavern to go to, I know a place," Topher said. He sat up, leaning over the edge of the cart, wobbling a little. Given what he'd gone through, Jayna worried he might topple out of the wagon altogether. She was getting tired of carrying him, and didn't know if she would be able to lift him if he were to fall out again.

"I'm sure you do," Eva snapped at him.

Jayna studied Eva. Every so often, Eva would bite her lip as she looked at him, and her gaze would flicker over to the enchantment resting on the back of the wagon, but she never spent too much time staring at it before turning her attention away again.

At least Eva was ready for whatever might come at them. Jayna had to be, too.

"What is it?" Jayna whispered.

Eva shook her head. "Nothing."

Jayna recognized that it was, in fact, something, but if Eva didn't want to share, then she didn't think she should push her. At this point, she just wanted to get someplace where they could sit down, talk about what had happened to Topher, and from there she could decide what she needed to do. With everything she had been through so far, she figured that having a glass of wine with Eva might even benefit her.

"Where is this place?" Jayna asked Topher.

He grinned. "It's not far. You just have to go across the river, then wind along Anderson Road, and it's near a small stream leading into the river."

Eva groaned. Jayna looked over to her.

"I know the place."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It figures a guy like him would favor it. But it'll be out of the way, so you'll probably love it." She looked over to Topher. "We might as well have him drag us there after everywhere else he's dragged us tonight."

Topher hopped out of the wagon.

"You don't have to drag me," he said, smiling slightly.

He wobbled for a moment, unsteady on his feet, and he glanced over to Eva, grin widening slightly, but she just glared at him. They were probably about the same age, and Topher would be pretty enough when cleaned up, but she'd never seen Eva interested in anyone. Or anything, for that matter. Mostly wine.

"Can you walk?" Jayna asked.

"Of course I can walk," he said. "What do you take me for?"

"I take you for somebody who had a dwarfing taken out of him today. So, I just want to make sure you can walk."

He took a step, stumbled, then caught himself. Jayna resisted the urge to help him, not wanting to offer him much more support, but perhaps he might need it, given what had happened to him.

"I can handle this," he said, mostly to himself. He shook his head, clenching his jaw and balling his fists, then took a deep breath. He staggered forward. Each step seemed lumbering, but by the time he had taken a dozen, he did seem to have his balance. He made his way along the road.

The thudding of boots behind them caught Jayna's attention. They moved to the side of the street, Jayna twisting the ring on her finger until the sound faded. Whatever guards were out patrolling seemed to take a different direction.

Jayna shared a glance with Eva, who seemed to make a point of ignoring her.

She caught up to Eva. "What is it that you aren't telling me?"

Eva shook her head. "It's nothing," she whispered.

"There's something going on."

Eva glanced over. She picked up the enchantment, gripping it in a white-knuckled fist. Jayna feared she might crush it, but during her studies at the Academy, she had learned that enchantments weren't easily damaged. It would take more than somebody squeezing it hard for it to shatter.

"Something's off here," she said, looking at Topher's back. "I'm not exactly sure what it is, but it worries me."

"This has to be more than just a Festival of Mourn. The dwarving are dark creatures and filled with the dark power." Eva said and looked over to Jayna. "If they're used in this festival, then the kind of power they will be drawing by feeding could be considerable."

"I don't think this should surprise either of us. We've known there has been increasing activity moving this way. That's why Ceran sent me here."

Eva was quiet, staring at Topher's back for a long moment. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Jayna took a deep breath, letting out a long sigh. "No. Not at all." She squeezed her fist, feeling the pain of the dragon stone ring. "Which is why I have been trying to summon Ceran ever since we pulled that dwarving out."

"What if he doesn't answer?"

"Then we have to destroy it ourselves."

"I'm not sure we can," Eva said.

They hurried through the streets, heading past a series of increasingly rundown buildings. They were all made of the same slick stone, with a hint of glowing moss running along the surface. Topher traced his hand along the moss, then pulled it back and stared at it. Was he looking at the bioluminescence from the moss? He stumbled toward the center of the street again, and Jayna feared he might

collapse, but he caught himself, and jogged forward until he caught his footing again.

"I don't know if more ale makes sense for him," she said to Eva. "And if we have an enchantment holding a dangerous creature. . ."

That elicited soft laughter from the dark-haired woman. She paused under one of the streetlights, the pale light reflecting off her milky white skin. "The enchantment is going to be dangerous regardless of where it is. And him"—she nodded to Topher—"I don't know how much of that is from what it took to remove the dwarding . . . or how much is just him."

"Maybe it's a combination of both," Jayna said.

He paused at another building—a blacksmith's shop, from the look of the sign hanging above it—and ran his hand along the thick greenish moss that glowed with a pale yellow light.

Jayna suppressed a sigh. She had been up a long time, and at this point, wanted nothing more than to get some rest. It had been a while since she'd used as much magic as she had tonight, especially considering how much she had forced into the enchantment. That typically would have drained her significantly, but while she did feel the effect, there was a part of her that wasn't quite as tapped out as she would have been before. It was almost as if that dark energy she had caught a glimpse of at the periphery of her awareness had gifted her with greater strength.

She twisted the dragon stone ring.

In the year she'd served as a Toral, she had never once truly felt the Toral power was dark. Since Ceran had granted her a connection to his power, she'd looked into what it meant, but had only found a few details—mostly rumors, but enough that she worried how much of them were true. Though she'd never met any others, some of those rumors spoke of dark energy among those who served as Torals. Those rumors often accused the Torals of

serving dark magic—though Jayna hadn't felt that draw. Up until now, she had never observed it within herself.

It made it easier for her to serve Ceran when he demanded she move, chasing rumors of a new dark power. Certainly, it kept her from fearing the consequences. It was the darkness that people like Char feared, but Jayna had always assumed that darkness came from ignorance of the truth of that power, rather than anything more. While she'd been at the Academy, she had seen far too many people using as much or more power as she could call through the dragon stone ring, and had a hard time thinking that the kind of power she called upon truly was dark. It was unearned magic, but nothing more than that. What had happened today, while she was trying to help Topher, had left her with a very different feel for it.

"Can I see it?" she asked Eva, nodding to the enchantment she clutched.

They were nearing the western edge of the city. Daylight had started to break, and she figured it wouldn't be too much longer before one of them crashed.

Eva held it out. "Be careful with it. I warned you that it's not completely stable."

"I think I know how to handle enchantments."

"This is something more than an enchantment now," Eva said. "We'll have to find a way to make it more stable somehow."

As Jayna took it, she noticed its weight, like a heavy river rock, and the smooth, slightly warm feel of the container. The markings along the side were evidence of the spellcraft Char had put into it, and she ran her thumb along the surface, feeling those markings buried beneath her thumb. Swirls of color, mostly dark grays and a hint of maroon that she couldn't help but feel came from Eva's blood, worked into the surface of the enchantment—unusual colors for any spell made with sorcery. A part of the enchantment flared

within her, heat blooming for a moment, as if it recognized her holding it, and she realized what Eva meant.

It was something more than just an enchantment.

There was a combination of powers within it. Not only was there Char's power, but the power Eva had put into it—magic she only reluctantly revealed, but Jayna could still feel it. Then there was Jayna's contribution. Her own power was different, though similar to that of a sorcerer. It was the power of the Toral. The power of the dragon stone ring. Power that was borrowed, not earned.

"I don't feel anything inside of it," Jayna said.

"It's still there," Eva said.

"Are you sure?" She looked up from the enchantment. "If this thing were to escape . . ."

"If this were to escape, you would know it. There would be no question the enchantment failed."

"Do you think it will?"

Eva stared down at the enchantment, then slowly shook her head. "I hope not. For all of our sakes, I hope not."

THEY REACHED THE TAVERN ON THE FAR WESTERN SIDE OF THE city. Here there was little more than small homes mixed in with other shops, and jumbles of crumbling rock, most of them with a heavy coating of the glowing moss clinging to them. The air was far more humid in this part of the city, and Jayna took forceful breaths, trying to overpower the heaviness within her chest. She could feel the weight within her with each breath she took, and she struggled against it.

The spellbook in her pocket also felt heavier than it should, though that might only be her guilt in having taken it from the outpost. If Char had found out . . .

Jayna was determined to keep him from learning that she'd taken one.

"Here we are," Topher said, stumbling to a stop and spreading his hands wide on either side of him. He grinned at Eva, as if he had accomplished some great feat by bringing them both here. "You wanted a tavern that would still serve ale. This one does. And it's quiet here."

"Actually, it was wine," Eva said, pushing past him and toward the door. She tested it quickly before forcing it open, standing in the doorway a moment before disappearing inside it.

Topher wobbled. "What did I do to her?" he muttered.

“Probably nothing,” Jayna said, tapping him on the shoulder. “She has her own issues.”

“I’m not used to beautiful women looking at me the way she does.”

Jayna chuckled. She wondered what Eva would think of being called a beautiful woman. Maybe she’d consider it a compliment, but then again, when it came to Eva, she rarely took compliments that well. “You have to get to know her better.”

“Have the two of you been friends for a long time?”

Topher reached the doorway. It was a narrow door, like so many of the buildings in this part of the city, and low enough that he would have to duck his head. He gripped the faded gray wood frame and looked back at Jayna.

“Long enough.”

Topher nodded then stepped forward, hitting the top of his head and wincing before ducking down and heading into the tavern.

Jayna looked along the street, feeling a bit more activity around her than before. Since it was early, there weren’t many people out, so it was strange she could feel it—a definite sense she had. It was almost as if there were something in the action along the street that came to her, whether through her sorcery or through the dragon stone ring, she didn’t know.

Sorcery was the magic of life. It was a powerful sort of magic, and intrinsic to the user, but once a sorcerer knew how to tap into the magic within them, they were able to use it to influence the world around them.

Topher poked his head out of the door, grinning at her. “Are you coming?”

Jayna took a deep breath and headed inside of the tavern. It was empty, just the three of them. She saw no sign of any waitstaff or proprietor, and nothing to suggest that they should even be there.

The tavern itself was small—unsurprising, given the building it occupied—and the floor was made of damp stone, similar to the stone outside. The green moss had followed the walls inside, and there were patches of it on the interior stone. The air wasn't nearly as humid as it was outside, though that was partially because of the now faintly crackling hearth in the back of the tavern. There were only a handful of tables—all a solid, dark wood with a heavy grain—with simple chairs situated around them.

"I'm not so sure we should be here," Jayna said, glancing over to Eva, who sat in the corner.

"Nonsense," Topher said. "No one's going to care if we're here."

He stumbled off to the back of the room, heading through a doorway and disappearing. The door flopped back into place, leaving her alone with Eva.

Jayna swept her gaze around the inside of the tavern as she made her way over to Eva's spot at one of the tables near the wall. She positioned herself so that she could look in either direction, toward the front door and toward the hearth. There was a gap between her and the wall though, almost as if she were afraid to get too close to the damp stone.

"Why do I get the sense he's not telling us something?" Jayna asked, pulling out the chair and sitting. There was a layer of moisture on it, and she wished she had a towel to wipe it down. Most of the nicer taverns throughout the city had towels for such a purpose, though she had a feeling this would never pass as a nicer tavern.

"Probably because he came to us with a dwarfing inside of him," Eva said. "If he has wine, I suppose him not telling us everything he knows doesn't matter."

"Do you think a place like this has wine?" Jayna asked, looking around. The stone on the wall opposite her had large chips in it, sections of it that had cracked and started

to crumble, leaving the wall pockmarked. Hunks of the cracked stone littered the ground.

Finally, Topher came out of the kitchen, surprisingly carrying a bottle of wine, along with two thin-stemmed glasses, and a mug of ale, presumably for himself. He stumbled, but caught himself before dropping any of it. Only a little bit of ale sloshed onto the ground, and he stared down at it, a pouty look on his face.

"Thank the gods," Eva said, as he handed her the bottle of wine and the two glasses. She made quick work of uncorking it, then poured herself a glass before pouring another and offering it to Jayna.

She wasn't in much of a mood to drink, but she also didn't want Eva to drink the entire bottle of wine herself. At least Jayna knew tricks to burn off the effects of the wine.

Topher pulled out a chair and sat on it backward, leaning toward the table and resting his mug of ale on it. "See?"

"Do you care to tell us about how you know of this place?" Jayna asked, swirling the wine in her glass. It was a deep crimson, and it had a strangely oaken scent, but there was something else mixed within it that she couldn't quite place. Perhaps a note of chamomile, though that wouldn't be typical for wine. In her time within the Academy, she had learned to identify various substances by smell, not only by taste. There were advantages to that. If she could identify the odors, she had a much better chance of using what she uncovered to keep herself safe if she, or anyone with her, were attacked with anything poisonous. As sorcerers were often involved in various dangerous courses of action, it was necessary for her, and anyone who might be with her, to have such an ability.

"I know about it because it's owned by a friend of mine. At least, he *was* a friend of mine." He tipped back his mug of ale, taking a long drink before setting it down. "He disappeared about a week and a half ago. I've been staying here ever since. Sort of watching over it, if you know what I

mean. I'd only known Robert for about a month, ever since I got to the city. I met him when I found this place." Topher shrugged and took another drink of ale. "Robert was a good guy. Didn't mind sharing his ale, easygoing with the people who frequented his tavern." He grinned, looking over to Eva. "You know the kind, I'm sure." Eva glared at him, and Topher took another quick drink. "Anyway. He opened up his tavern to me, and I was here quite a bit. Spent quite a few nights here, as I'm sure you could imagine."

"Is that right?" Jayna asked.

"More than I would've thought. I certainly spent more time here than I had spent in other taverns before I came here." He grinned slightly. "Not that I never visited taverns, mind you, but never quite so much as I have since coming here."

"What happened to Robert?" Jayna asked.

He took a deep breath. "I don't know. People all around me have ended up missing, not just Robert. There were two others, both men who came to this tavern. Regulars, I suppose you'd call them."

Jayna looked over to Eva, frowning. "What do you think happened to them?"

Topher shrugged as he took another drink. "Can't say that I know. I've been looking into it. Searching for answers, as it were. I found this."

He had a scrap of paper in hand, and he slipped it across the table. Jayna glanced at it briefly, knowing already what she was going to see.

It was the same marking she had seen in the Wandering Hen.

The same symbol Jonathan had left on the letter he'd sent her.

"That's how I heard about you, Jayna. Heard you were looking for someone in the city."

Jayna tensed. She had been careful to avoid asking too many questions about her brother, at least not openly. The

kind of questions she could ask about Jonathan were the kind that would end up putting her in danger. Given the type of men Jonathan had spent time around, and the kind of power he might have gotten involved in, she knew better than to expose her connections to her brother too openly.

And she had needed to be careful for other reasons.

She was in the city in pursuit of rumors of dark magic—along with whatever she could discover about her brother. Besides the banewig, now the dwarding were more evidence of dark magic. And tied to the festival, if only she could learn how.

“What did you hear?” Jayna asked.

“I just heard you were searching for someone. A man with a marking like this.” He shrugged. “And I heard you had ways of helping others.”

Jayna glanced to Eva, who ignored her. “I don’t do that too often.”

“That’s not what I hear,” Topher said, grinning. He was oblivious to the pointed stare Jayna gave him. “There were a couple of people who said you healed them when they got hurt. Figured that with what happened to me, I could go to you.”

“What do you mean what happened to you?” Jayna asked.

Topher glanced from her to Eva. “I don’t really know. I was looking for Robert, you see. Came over here to the tavern, but he’d been gone. I made a point of coming over here every day since he disappeared, but never found anything. I started to give up hope, but I began to poke around, asking questions of my own. I made sure the tavern was taken care of.”

“I’m sure you did,” Eva said, swirling her wine before taking a swig and setting it down.

“Right,” Topher said. “Anyway, I made a point of keeping the tavern cleaned up, but I never left it open. I figured Robert wouldn’t much approve of that. Not that I have any

way of running a tavern, such as it were. I'm more of a patron than a businessman."

"You're something," Eva said.

Topher grinned. "Thank you." He took a drink of ale, setting it back down again. "Anyway, I think I saw who attacked me at a market not far from here. You probably know the one. Hester Square Market?"

Jayna nodded. "I know the one."

Given its proximity to the edge of the city, there were quite a few strange people who frequented it. Nothing at all like some of the places Jayna visited. Many of the markets in the city served more of the local crowd, whereas the Hester Square Market tended to cater to more of an exotic kind of crowd. Darker magic, if anything.

"Anyway. There was this man. Didn't get a good look at him, but he obviously got a look at me. He slammed into me. After that, I started getting sick. Then I got sicker."

"And you ended up at my place?" Jayna asked.

"Not at first. It took a few days."

Jayna looked over to Eva. It had been a few days? What would happen if one of the dwarding stayed inside somebody for more than a few days?

The creature had already been powerful. She could feel that when she had pulled it off. She remembered the way it had slithered, squirming against her, fighting everything she attempted to do to remove it.

If something like that were to have gotten even more powerful . . .

She didn't know what would've happened. It was possible it would have continued feeding, but she had a sense there was something more to it than that.

Eva ignored her again.

"Anyway. I started feeling off. Couldn't really explain it. I found myself losing stretches of time. Hours."

"Probably because you were drinking," Eva muttered, taking a swig of wine.

Jayna chuckled nervously. They still had the dwarding to deal with and she didn't know how they were going to destroy it. "How did you end up at my place?"

"It just got to be too much," Topher said, rubbing the back of his neck. He leaned forward with a pained stare toward the mug of ale. "I needed to get help. I knew it. I hadn't found any sign of Robert or any of the others, and then I started getting sick. Nothing ale could take care of."

"Why would you think ale would take care of anything?" Jayna asked.

"Something my mother used to tell me. You have to feed a flu."

"You feed it ale?"

"I don't know. Better than some of the other things Robert had here."

Jayna leaned back, looking at the wine. She wasn't really thirsty, and after seeing the expression on Eva's face, and the darkness that crept through her, she didn't really want to drink anything and end up in a similar condition.

"Anyway, will you help me find out what happened to them?"

Jayna looked over to him, shaking her head. "I think you've got the wrong person. I'm not somebody who searches for other people."

"Isn't that what you're doing? Gods, you *did* remove whatever it was from me."

"It's a dwarding," Eva said.

"Right," Topher said. "A dwarding. If you could take that out of me, then surely you can help me track Robert. He couldn't have gone far."

"Maybe he's dead," Eva said.

Topher regarded her a moment before laughing softly. "Maybe, but it's just not like him."

"To be dead?" Eva asked.

Jayna suppressed a smile.

"Maybe I don't know what he's like," Topher said. He drank the last of his ale, and looked at the empty mug with disappointment. "Still, I feel like I need to find him. He helped me out when I first came to the city, and gave me a place, you know. I want to do whatever I can to pay him back for his kindness."

This was going too far. She didn't mind taking small jobs while waiting for Ceran to tell her what else he needed from her, but finding a tavern owner seemed a stretch.

But there was the symbol.

Ceran would understand, wouldn't he?

"You haven't even paid me for my service," Jayna said.

Topher looked over, grinning. "What do you charge?"

"Not enough," Eva muttered.

"What can you pay?" Jayna asked, ignoring Eva's comment.

"I don't have much."

"Figures," Eva said.

"But I can give you this."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a coin made out of stone. It was circular and flat, with an engraving along its surface. He slid it across the table to Jayna, who took it. As soon as she did, she recognized a hint of power within it.

"It's an enchantment," she said.

Topher nodded. "I'm not all that powerful, but I've got a little bit of talent. Sort of natural, as it were. My parents always said I could have studied at the Academy if I had the chance." He grinned at her. "Not that I could do what you do, you know. Just that if I had taken the time to really get serious about harnessing power . . . I never really wanted to take the time, though. I was satisfied with what I could do."

"You're a dular?" Eva said with a sneer.

"Not really one of the dular," Topher replied, sitting back and stiffening. "Not like they have here in Nelar. I don't have nearly their level of talent."

Jayna flipped the stone in her hand. Despite his protestations, there was some skill involved in it. It would have taken a reasonable amount of magic to make it—for him, or whoever had done so. Enchantments took on aspects of the power of those who created them. There were some sorcerers who had exquisite enchantments. The detail in them looked more impressive than anything any artisan could make. Oftentimes, the enchantment itself was prized simply for the artwork involved in it, and less so for the magic embedded within it. The more powerful the sorcerer, the more exquisite the nature of the enchantment.

There were others, like the dular, who had a natural gift for creating enchantments, though they were limited in the kind of enchantments they could create, tied to some part of themselves. Some dular enchantments were powerful, especially if they poured enough emotion into the creation. In the case of this one, she had a sense that it was somewhere between what she saw from most of the dular, and what she detected from sorcerers like Char.

“What does it do?”

“That’s just it,” Topher said. “It doesn’t have a whole lot of use. It is a bit of a tracker, though it’s keyed to me.”

Eva started to laugh, and Jayna shot her a look until she cut herself off. “What do you mean, ‘it’s keyed to’ you?”

“Just like I said. If you ever needed to find me, this will help.”

“So basically, you’re giving me something that will help me find you again?” Jayna flipped the stone coin in her hand before setting it back down on the table.

“Well, if we’re going to be working together, I think that would be useful, don’t you?”

“Whoever said we were going to be working together?” she asked.

“You don’t want to work with me?” There was real hurt in his tone, and something else as well.

Disappointment? Fear?

Jayna recognized those emotions.

She swept her gaze around the inside of the tavern. He was missing his friend. It wasn't so different from her missing her brother. Well, maybe a little bit. Losing a friend wasn't quite the same as losing the only living family member she had. But there was more to Topher's situation. It was about how he had been attacked.

She let out a sigh. Ceran had sent her looking for dark magic users. She had found them. Not the way she had expected, but now she had someone who had been targeted by them. What happened to Topher had to be connected to the festival.

Which meant that she had to understand what was going on.

The Festival of Mourn and the dwarding.

She squeezed a pulse of power through the dragon stone ring.

She hoped there would be a response soon. Ceran would have to know she had used that power.

"We *do* need to know more about the dwarding," she said to Eva.

"No," Eva said. She shifted and pulled the enchantment out of her pocket, setting it on the table. "This is all we need to know about. And even with this, I think we need to dispose of it. That's probably the whole reason you were sent to this fire-blasted place."

"Not until we find out what happened," Jayna said, taking the enchantment and sticking it into her pocket. It was weighty enough that she wouldn't be able to ignore it completely. Though Eva might be right—it was possible this was the only reason they were here. Ceran guided her to track dark magic, and what else was this dwarding but dark magic? Usually, he came the moment she found it, destroying the darkness before she ended up in too much trouble. "If there are others like this, we need to figure out what happened and why they are out there."

“We?” Eva asked.

“I’m going to need your help.”

Jayna had a feeling that Eva’s help was not only going to be useful, but necessary. Eva knew something about the dwarving, even if she wanted to deny it.

More than that, Eva seemed to know some way of holding them. The enchantment might be a part of it, but if it came down to finding more dwarving, and others who had been attacked by them, she was going to need whatever strange blood magic Eva possessed in order to maintain the trap. Then they could figure out how to dispose of them.

All she had to do was find out how—and why.

“Fine. I’ll help,” Eva said.

Jayna nodded, turning her attention back to Topher. “It looks like we will help you find your friend.”

He lifted the mug of ale, looking into it before setting it back down. He flashed a smile at her, not bothering to hide the heavy relief in his eyes, nor did he conceal the worry when he flicked his gaze toward the enchantment that sat in her pocket. He lifted the mug again and tilted it in his mouth, as if there were still something in there. Then he moved it away and glanced inside, shaking it before finally setting it back down on the table and rubbing a fist on his temple.

For all his stumbling and bumbling, Topher was more worried than he let on.

Jayna figure that was probably good.

Given what he had gone through, and what they might still have to face, she needed him to take it seriously. She didn’t really know what was going on, and she didn’t really know what she might need to do, but she would need somebody who took things seriously.

Now if she could only keep him and Eva sober, they might actually be able to get something done.

THE HESTER SQUARE MARKET WAS A LARGE COMPLEX ON THE outskirts of the western edge of the city. As they approached it, Jayna saw a low wall that surrounded it, with a small wooden gate allowing carts and vendors to head into the square. Buildings remained somewhat distant from the market, almost as if concerned about getting too close. On the far western side of the market, a dense forest rose up, though Jayna had never attempted to even step foot inside. Beyond the trees, somewhere deeper into the forest, the El'aras had power. She may have had some training at the Sorcery Academy, but she didn't have enough knowledge, skill, or strength to be able to withstand one of the El'aras—let alone face *more* than one.

She was tired, having slept for only the latter part of the morning, and she rubbed a fist across her eyes, trying to knuckle out the sleep from her, though it did little to help. Eva somehow managed to look much more alert than her, and that was after having had several glasses of wine the night before. Or morning.

They had changed clothes, with Jayna dressing in a simple gray dress and throwing a brown cloak over her shoulders. Her clothing suited Nelar, at least for the most part. The cloak itself would shed moisture. If it were to rain

—which it most undoubtedly would not—it might get saturated, but with little more than a mist in the air, the cloak would provide some protection.

Eva had on a pale white dress, a silver chain around her neck, and somehow, her skin looked as if it glowed in the early afternoon sunlight—she often seemed as if she glowed, especially in the daylight, which Jayna had chalked up to whatever magical heritage she had. Not that Eva would talk about it. That was, if she even remembered it.

Topher still hadn't shown up.

"He had better get here soon," Eva muttered. She swept her gaze around the market before finally turning and looking at Jayna. "This isn't the kind of place I wanted to spend my day."

"Me neither, but with what we've seen so far, I think we need to be here."

"What exactly do you think we've seen?" Eva asked. "You've seen a strange creature feeding off of a dular."

"Exactly," Jayna said, locking eyes with Eva. "We found a darkly magical creature feeding off of someone with magic. What do you think would happen if that were to attack me? Or you?"

"The dwaring wouldn't attack me," Eva said, turning away.

She was surprisingly certain despite how little she remembered of her own past. "Fine. If it attacks me?"

"I'm sure you would be protected as well."

"Why?"

She flicked her gaze to the ring on Jayna's finger before looking back at her. "You would be fine."

Jayna didn't think the ring would offer all that much protection, but maybe it did. When she had pulled on the dwaring, she felt no sense of it attempting to come to her. That left her thinking that maybe she was safe.

It hadn't gone after Char either.

Only Topher.

Maybe that was because it had already latched onto him and was feeding, but maybe there was something more to it.

“What else do you know about the dwarding?” she asked, sweeping her gaze around the outskirts of the square. Vendors lined the inside of the wall, and there were more lines of vendors inside the square. Mostly carts, some formal wagons, and only a few small tables. There wasn’t much of a crowd at this time of day. A smattering of people wandered through the market, though there were larger clusters in some places. Jayna couldn’t see what drew interest in those areas, but was curious.

“I’ve told you all I remember about them.”

“You’ve told me what you want to tell me, but maybe you know more. We just have to dig at it until we figure it out.”

She looked over again, shaking her head. “It’s all I know,” Eva snapped.

A pair of short, bald men headed into the market. Neither of them looked in their direction, but one of them had a small ring on his finger. She stared for a moment, worried that maybe he was a Toral even though she’d never seen another one before, until she recognized the symbol on it.

Not a Toral. A sorcerer.

She slipped into the shadows of an overhang.

“What do you think they’re doing here?” she whispered.

“What?” Eva asked.

Jayna looked around her, but there was still no sign of Topher, so she moved Eva off to the side of the road until she could get a better view of the two men who’d just entered. Both wore black cloaks that were faded to a dark gray. She had suspected that at least one of the men was a sorcerer, based on his ring, and wondered if the other might be as well. Sorcerers would have the same traveling cloak given to them by the Society, though the cloak usually

had a series of symbols marked along it, the signature of the Sorcerers' Society.

And here she still had the enchantment with the dweaving in it.

She hadn't wanted to leave it behind, but she didn't like it with her either. What they *really* needed was some way to destroy it. She didn't have that yet.

"At least one sorcerer. Maybe two." She nodded to the men.

"They don't look anything like any sorcerer I've ever seen," Eva said.

"And how many sorcerers have you seen?"

"I don't know," she said, irritation weighing in her voice.

"The Sorcerers' Society is enormous," Jayna said. "There are sorcerers in every land, all serving the same Society."

"I know," Eva said.

Jayna shot her a look, which Eva ignored. "The Society aims to offer guidance."

"They aim to rule, not just offer guidance."

"Maybe," Jayna said.

In the year since she had left the Academy, she had seen some things from the Society that had surprised her. When she had still been within the Academy, she never would've expected that the Sorcerers' Society wanted to rule, but the more she had seen and experienced, the more she started to question their goals. There were some places Jayna had been where the sorcerers were more than just advisors; there were some places where they had taken on leadership, either directly or indirectly.

Jayna thought indirect rule was almost worse. At least with direct rule, there was no question about what was taking place. There was no doubting that the sorcerers were responsible for the good or the bad. When the Society ruled indirectly, influencing councils or kings, it was easier to blame someone else.

"Anyway, I don't know why they would be here."

"They're after something in the market," Eva said.

"Obviously," Jayna said. "Could they have detected the enchantment?"

"It's possible. Do you think Char said anything?"

Jayna hoped he hadn't, but relying on an old friend to keep her trust was dangerous, especially when dark magic was involved.

"Where is he?" she asked, looking around for Topher. "Let's find where he was attacked and see this marking, then we can move on."

He had agreed to meet them in the afternoon, though his absence wasn't completely surprising. She had needed to cut him off from drinking too much of the wine, and the ale, and pretty much everything within Robert's tavern. Now that she had removed the dweaving, and he had started to feel better, he had turned to drinking, as if he could wash away the effects of everything he'd been through.

"You should have forced him to stay with us," Eva said.

"I didn't get the feeling you wanted that."

"I didn't want it," Eva said. "But if you were worried about him coming to join us, then we should have kept him nearby."

Jayna just shook her head. She didn't need somebody else staying in the small home they occupied. Having Eva there was enough. There were times when Eva was pleasant and useful, and then there were other times, like now, when she was more irritable—and irritating—than not. Those times left Jayna thinking that maybe she would have been better served staying on her own, and not having somebody like Eva with her all the time.

"Maybe he's not as concerned as he seemed to be about what happened to his friends," Jayna said. Even that didn't feel quite right. He certainly had sounded as if he were worried about what had befallen Robert and the other regulars in the tavern. "Maybe we should go look . . ."

Jayna trailed off as she saw a figure coming through the market toward them.

Topher had changed clothes. Now he was dressed in a deep green jacket and pants, almost out of place in this part of the city. There was something upscale about his new attire, and not at all what she would've expected from him.

He flashed a wide smile as he neared. "There you two are. I wasn't sure if you were going to come."

Jayna shook her head at his attempt at a joke.

"What are you all dressed up for?" Eva asked. She eyed him differently, sweeping her gaze from head to toe.

"I figured that now I'm feeling better, I should dress a little bit better." He swept his hand along his jacket. "What do you think?"

"I think you look like you belong in the kitchen," Eva said.

Topher chuckled. "I do like to cook, but what sort of kitchen help dresses like this?"

"I never said kitchen help. Maybe in the oven instead," she snapped.

Jayna looked around for the sorcerers, but didn't see them. "Let's get moving. We can see what happened to your friend. Maybe you can start by showing us where you think he was abducted. And that marking you claimed was left behind."

"I can show you where I think *I* was poisoned," he said. "I don't know what happened to the others. I don't even know if they were in the market. Gods, for that matter, I don't know if they even came here. Just that I started getting sick after they disappeared. And afterward, I'd been looking into their disappearance."

The coincidence was enough that Jayna had to think the events were all related, though she wasn't sure what to make of it. They headed into the market, and she took a deep breath.

Something about the market itself seemed to change the smells within its walls compared to the rest of the city. On the other side of the wall, the air had the damp humidity to it that was common throughout the city, along with a hint of an earthy odor, whereas once she stepped through the gate, past the wall, the atmosphere had a very different aroma. Something of spice and smoked meats, and even a hint of sweetness that reminded her of home.

Topher stopped near a food stand. The cart was a pale white wood, and the man standing behind it had on a wide-brimmed hat, a loose-fitting jacket, and baggy pants. He wasn't from Nelar, but Jayna didn't know enough about his clothing to identify his origins.

"What are you doing?" Jayna whispered.

He flashed a smile and stepped forward, slipping a copper onto the man's table. "I'll take some of your best meats."

The man looked down at the copper. "Not with that, you won't."

Topher lifted the copper, slipping it back into his pocket. "How much?"

"If you want the best, you've got to pay for it. Two silvers."

Topher's eyes widened. "Two? You must have some pretty impressive food in there."

"No one has smoked meats like Petra."

Topher smiled. He reached into his pocket but didn't pull his hand out. "How much do I get if I pay you two silvers?" He glanced over to Jayna and Eva. "You see, I do have two beautiful women with me. If I were to pay you two silvers, I would need assurances that my money is going somewhere."

"Assurances," Petra said, waving his hand. "Gah! I give you assurances the food is safe. Nothing more than that."

"Then maybe I need to move along. I'm sure there are other vendors here."

Topher started away, but Petra reached across, grabbing his wrist and pulling him back. "You do not walk away from Petra. I give you enough smoked meats for the three of you. Two silvers."

"Show me."

"Listen, Topher," Jayna said. "We need to keep moving. I don't know what you are—"

Topher glanced over, shaking his head.

For whatever reason, Topher seemed to have it in his mind that he needed to provide meats for them. Jayna couldn't deny that her stomach rumbled a little, but she didn't need Topher buying food for her. She would rather have him pay her for the service of removing the dwarfing from him the night before. If he had enough money to pay for these other things, then certainly he had enough money to pay for her healing.

"See?" Petra said, pulling open a cabinet. The heavy smoke scent that drifted out filled her nostrils, and she couldn't help but feel as if maybe Topher were doing the right thing by bargaining with this man. The meats did smell good. Perhaps she did want to try them. "Venison. Goat. Even jaral. Very few have jaral in this land."

"I want a selection of each," Topher said.

"Two silvers," Petra said.

Topher pulled out the coins from his pocket, cupping them in his hand. Petra began to pull meats from his cabinets, and handed some to Topher, some to Jayna, and some to Eva, who took them a bit reluctantly. She wrinkled her nose as she sniffed at them.

Topher slipped the silvers into Petra's hand. "There you go. Now what else do you have?"

"I have nothing else. Just smoked meats."

Jayna used the opportunity to lean toward Petra. "How many sorcerers come through here?"

He glared at her before glancing to Topher. "You're asking the wrong man. I'm just a simple market vendor."

Don't know anything about the Society."

A hint of tension in his eyes suggested that he knew more than he let on.

"I'm just looking for a man who assaulted us outside the city." Let him think she needed his help. What kind of man wouldn't offer it?

"Go to the outpost and find out, then. Not here. Now, if you don't want anything more . . ." He turned away.

"I'm just looking into information. Nothing more than that. People have been targeted in the market."

Petra stiffened.

He knew something.

"If you know them—"

"I don't know them."

He said it quickly. Almost too quickly.

"At least show me where they were attacked."

Without turning back to her, he pointed. She noticed a small, darkened part of the market, where shadows pooled as two buildings tucked together. It was a place that could hide anything, even in the daylight.

"Thank you."

There was something here. Now they had to figure out what and who, but she had learned where. It was a start. That was better than nothing.

"What was that about?" Eva asked.

"That was about me trying to help the two of you," Topher said, obviously thinking she'd been talking to him. He took a bite of the meat, grinning. "You can't tell me that you're not hungry." He looked over to Jayna and then to Eva. "I could hear your stomachs rumbling. I know mine was. After a night like I had . . ."

"Thank you," Jayna said, giving Eva a look to silence her before she snapped at him again. Something like this would help restore her even faster, though she wasn't nearly as magically depleted as she would've expected, given how much power she had pulled on the night before. Rather, she

felt simply weakened from lack of sleep. "Do you care to tell us a little bit more about what happened here?"

"I'm not so sure I can," he said. "I didn't really see the guy. I was hit from behind."

"So you brought us here just because this was where you were attacked?" Eva said. "What if it wasn't even here?"

"Oh, it was here. I remember it. I was standing over there," he said, pointing into the distance. "And having a bite of bread. The cart over there has some of the best breads," he said, pointing to another cart. An older woman stood near it, then slouched down on a chair, sweeping her gaze around the inside of the market. "I don't really know what happened after that. I tried to pay attention, but I didn't get a good look at them."

Jayna made her way toward the darkened section, pausing at one of the carts as she passed by and glancing around. She didn't want to look as if she were going directly toward it, but she also needed to reach that part of the market so she could see if there were anything to be found there.

This cart sold clothing—at least, mostly clothing. There were some fabrics as well. They were smooth, soft, and almost sheer.

"You like my silks?" the man asked. He had dark hair, and as he grinned at her, she noticed that he seemed to be missing two bottom teeth. "Very high quality out of Indar. You won't find anything like that here."

"Because they aren't useful here," Eva said, grabbing a fistful of the silk and twisting it. "And this is far too coarse for silk. Most of it is much more supple."

"You would question the quality of my goods?"

Eva released her hand and took a step back, shooting a look at the man. "I'm not questioning your quality. I'm saying it stinks." She turned to a dress hanging from a hook on top of the cart. "The stitching is good though."

"Yes. My daughters are quite skilled—"

"But the embroidery could use some work."

Jayna frowned at Eva. What was she doing? There was no point in assaulting a merchant in the square.

"They are considered gifted in my land."

Eva turned to him. "I'm sure they are. And I'm sure you have no difficulty selling your goods in other places, but you won't be able to sell to my friends."

She strode off, leaving Jayna staring after her.

Topher just looked at her. "Who is she?"

"Sometimes I have no idea."

He traced his hand along the silk before looking at her. "She's not wrong. These aren't the highest quality silks."

"This is the best you will find in Nelar."

"This is the best we might find in this market. Certainly not the best in Nelar." Topher strode forward after Eva, and Jayna just shook her head.

This was not at all what she'd expected.

She turned to the merchant. "I'm terribly sorry for those two. I don't know what they were thinking."

"If you need anything, tell me. Perhaps a beautiful dress for a beautiful woman? I'm sure I have something that could go along with your red hair."

Jayna shook her head. "I don't love wearing dresses."

"No? It seems to me that a dress would accent your figure. You have such a lovely bosom—"

Jayna leaned toward him, and jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "That is the last time you will make any comment about my bosom." She started to summon power through the dragon stone ring, almost unintentionally, and pain blossomed in her finger. She was filled with irritation at the man—and the fact that he would leer at her as he did.

Jayna turned away and chased down Eva and Topher. She found them at a stand containing crafts. At first, she thought they were enchantments, but as she approached, she realized they were all too large for that. Despite being

made of stone and their appearance demonstrating a certain level of skill, they didn't have the same intricacy that she would've expected from a sorcerer, or even a dular.

Basically, they were a bit rougher looking.

Eva was talking to the man at the stand, leaning close to him and whispering. He was a bit older than her, with dark hair, a lean face, and narrow eyes. He wore a strange, flowing jacket of a velvety fabric, and moved his hands rapidly as he spoke. Jayna didn't recognize the language, though Eva seemed to speak it fluently.

"Who is she talking to?"

Topher shook his head. "I didn't know anybody spoke Urguin," he said.

"He's one of the Urguin?" She'd never encountered any of them, though knew they used strange items to power their magic.

He nodded. "They've had somebody here the last week. It's not terribly common for them to come to the city, according to Robert. Not that I could say with any certainty."

"It's not," Jayna said.

Topher looked over to her. "You know them?"

"I know enough about them to know they shouldn't be in Nelar."

"We don't see the Urguin in my village. Nothing really exciting ever happens there." He grinned. "Do you recognize their language?"

Jayna shook her head.

"I don't speak it. I've never known anybody who did," he said.

The expression of admiration in his eyes left Jayna chuckling. She could imagine that irritating Eva more than anything. It certainly wouldn't impress her.

"I'm going to see what else is in the market."

Topher nodded. "I'll stay with her."

Jayna turned away, but not before watching as Eva spoke quietly to the Urguin. She whispered, and there was an occasional snippet that Jayna heard, but not enough for her to understand what her friend was saying. It was an odd language, filled with harsh consonants and quick syllables, and it was far more rapid than she could keep up with.

One more thing that she had to understand about Eva.

She hurried through the market and glanced at other carts. Some of them had food—either more smoked meats, which seemed to be the most common, or breads and desserts—and others sold drinks. Wine and ale were the most common, though there were strange drinks too. Some had deep colorations, almost red or a pale green—drinks she would have no interest in consuming. There were other textile vendors, and craftsmen, and a variety of different merchants all scattered throughout.

Many of them looked to be from Nelar, though there were far more than she would've expected from outside of the city. It was clear from the strange clothing, but also from the various languages she heard spoken around her.

As she started to turn back to where Eva and Topher stood by the Urguin stand, she caught sight of a dark-haired man. She recognized his sloped forehead, wide cheeks, and strange facial hair.

She'd seen him.

He was one of the volar who had attacked her.

Jayna crept forward, watching. He was speaking to somebody, though they were blocked by the wagon nearest them. Suddenly, the man reached across, taking something from the other person.

Jayna could feel it. There was almost a sense of energy within the item, though she wasn't sure if what she detected were real or not. Maybe that was just her imagination.

She hurried forward, wanting to catch up to the volar. If nothing else, she needed to know what he might have

known about her brother. As she reached him, he turned, his eyes widening, and then he sprinted away.

Jayna glanced to the space where he'd been talking to someone else, but she didn't see anyone there. She couldn't let him get away. She needed answers, and the volar might have them.

JAYNA CHASED THE STRANGE MAN THROUGH THE MARKET. SHE passed several of the stands she had gone past before, most of them food vendors, the smells drifting to her nostrils, both savory and sweet, and she had to push her way through the crowd, weaving around more people who had started to fill the market. When she neared Eva and Topher, she slowed for just a moment. "I'll be right back."

"What are you going after?" Topher said, jogging up alongside her.

She grabbed him, shoving him in the opposite direction. "Stay with Eva. Tell her I saw one of the volar who attacked me a night ago."

Could it have only been one night?

It had felt like so long ago.

"What's a volar?"

"Dark magic user. Dangerous."

And the *other* two sorcerers she'd seen might be even more dangerous if they decided to come after her.

"I can help," Topher said.

Jayna didn't want to argue with him. She just wanted him to do what she asked. "Would you just go back to Eva? She can help you."

"And *I* can help *you*," he said.

"I know you want to help," she said. She glanced around the inside of the market. The volar had raced away, though she could see him moving through the crowd near the edge of the market. He wouldn't be able to get too far without her seeing him. He might hide, but there was something about him that was easy to track. She could sense his magic, so she had to think that even if he tried to disappear from her, she should be able to find him. "Just stay with her. You're still weakened from what happened last night."

Jayna gave him another shove, this time putting a little bit of force and magic into it. She didn't really want to, but she also didn't want to have to keep arguing with him. The longer she argued, the likelier the volar would disappear from her altogether and she'd lose out on her chance of catching and asking him.

She looked past him to Eva, locking eyes with her for a moment. "Keep this fool with you, will you?"

Eva glanced to the Urguin before turning her attention back to Topher and nodding.

The volar then crashed into somebody and went sprawling.

That was Jayna's chance.

She darted forward, nearing Petra, the meat vendor they had first encountered when coming to the market, then moving around him. A younger woman, along with two children, stepped in front of her.

Jayna pulled up short, stopping before crashing into them. She slipped around the woman, barely avoiding stumbling over the children, but the volar was gone.

Jayna stood in place, frustration filling her. Behind her, the sound of the market had started to intensify, the noise increasing as the people filling the market became more unruly. It surprised her that it would get more chaotic this late in the day, whereas most markets she'd been to tended to be busier first thing in the morning. Maybe it was the type of goods that were sold in the Hester Square Market,

or maybe it was the kind of vendors that were there, but either way, she now had to deal with a much more sizable crowd than she had before.

What was the volar doing in the market in the first place?

He shouldn't have been there.

It was too much of a coincidence that he was there, and given what she had seen and experienced so far with Topher, along with the volar, she doubted it was a coincidence at all. Maybe all of this *had* been coordinated in some way.

She stalked forward, twisting the dragon stone ring on her finger, looking for any sign of the volar, but didn't see him. Then she caught a flash of his cloak.

He was up ahead. Far enough that she had to run, but not so far that she didn't think she could catch up to him. All she had to do was add a little bit of magic to her step.

The spell was fairly straightforward. It was one of the earlier spells she learned at the Academy, and something most students learned to turn upon themselves.

She raced ahead. She had to be careful to avoid the attention of the sorcerers in the city, including the two balding sorcerers she'd seen going into the market. As long as they weren't with this volar, she doubted anyone would notice. Besides, the pattern that she placed on herself was a very mild magic, and certainly not enough to draw significant attention. At least, that was what she hoped.

Before the volar disappeared altogether, she traced a simple pattern of a spell on each of her thighs, a series of interlocking lines. As she pushed power through the pattern, a flare of speed surged.

Jayna ran.

She moved quickly, fluidly. When she reached a pile of crates in her way, she jumped, the spell she had placed on her leg giving her a bit more strength than usual. When she

reached the top of the stack of crates, she pushed off again, coming to land on the ground.

The volar raced away from her. The tension she felt along her skin suggested he was summoning magic.

She couldn't be the only one who would detect it.

When he disappeared from view, she pushed off the ground with a surge and jumped forward nearly fifteen feet before skidding around the corner. There he was.

Then he disappeared again.

Jayna ran.

She whipped past others as she raced along the street, but she wouldn't be able to maintain the speed for long.

Up ahead, she caught sight of the volar again.

He had reached the outskirts of the city, following a narrow and winding road around the edges of Nelar, but never heading deeper into the city itself. The buildings here were much like those near the tavern where Topher had led them the night before. They were all a bit rundown, all made of the same fading and failing stone, and all of them coated with the deep green moss that was prevalent in this part of the city. The air felt increasingly humid the more she ran, though Jayna didn't know if that was only an effect of her sprinting through the city, the effort of her work that made her feel a heaviness.

He disappeared behind a building.

Jayna slowed. Another flash of fabric in the direction he'd gone caught her attention, and she smiled to herself.

The volar had thought to hide.

But he had thought to hide in a crumbling stone building.

She prepared the starburst pattern. She had no idea where he might pop up, but she didn't have to be as focused with this pattern as she would with some of the other patterns. She wasn't about to hold back either.

While preparing the spell, she twisted the dragon stone ring.

She didn't want to use it if she didn't have to.

Now that she had slowed, nearing the volar, and now that they were still on the outskirts of the city itself, she didn't have to hesitate quite as much to use her Toral power, and she *could* summon more energy through the dragon stone ring.

She rounded a corner.

A blast of energy came toward her.

It streaked at her as a fireball, though with lines of darkness through it.

Dark magic.

A fireball like that was difficult magic, even with an enchantment.

Jayna braced, painfully pulling on power through the dragon stone ring, creating a shimmering barrier around her. When the blast of fire struck, it dissipated quickly. The ring seemed to absorb some of it while also deflecting it.

She didn't know how many similar blasts the volar would have. Any enchantment worth its measure would be useful for more than one blast of power. Given that she was dealing with the volar, she *hoped* it was an enchantment, and nothing more than that. The alternative meant she was dealing with a sorcerer.

"I just need to talk," Jayna said.

Another blast struck, this time dissipating again.

The energy was more considerable than she would've expected.

Yet another blast of energy struck her.

The frequency was more than she would've expected from him as well.

It took time to reset an enchantment, and she would've hoped to have time to prepare a defense. Without the dragon stone ring, this blast might have overwhelmed her. Pain coursed up her arm. It would be too much for her pretty soon.

She could already feel the barrier starting to shimmer, and doubted she would be able to withstand too many more blasts like that. If he continued to attack her with the same sort of energy, eventually her protection would fade.

Which meant she had to go on the offensive.

"All I want to do is talk," she said again.

The man blasted her, and this time the power was a bit different than it had been before. Rather than a pure fireball, this was fire mixed with a hint of wind, swirling it toward her in a spiral that focused to a point. It was designed to penetrate a shielding.

At least, it would have been designed to penetrate any *typical* shielding.

Pain flared along her arm and up her neck as she used the dragon stone ring for protection.

How many enchantments did he have?

The rough cobblestone street was thankfully empty, but was slick with moisture, and she felt the weight of each breath from the humidity in the air.

He blasted her again.

In order to target her, he had to poke his head up from behind a pile of stone. It gave her somewhere to target as well.

Jayna hurriedly traced the symbol for the blade of light, a series of three triangles in rapid succession, and whipped her wrist in a quick flick. The blade surged forward, blasting toward the stone.

It was powerful magic.

The vibrant, yellowish streak of power struck him.

He held his hands up, crossing his arms in front of each other, and her blast struck the enchantments he wore around each of his wrists.

It still blew him backward.

Jayna scrambled toward him, crawling over the rock, and reached him before he could gather himself and get to his feet. She held her hand over his face. He had ruddy

features, pale blue eyes, and short brown hair with streaks of gray. He could have been anyone, not a dark magic user.

"I *really* don't like that, so don't try it again," Jayna said.

He tried to crawl back, but she kicked him in the side. Since he had shot her with a crossbow not too long ago, she reasoned that she could use physical torment as well.

"Come on!" she snapped at him. "All I want is to talk. You were more than happy to do that with someone else back there. Just tell me what you were doing in the market. What does it have to do with the Festival of Mourn?"

He glowered at her.

She prepared another blade of light. If she had to, she could continue to blast at him, though she didn't really want to use that on him at this range. It would just as likely kill him as maim him, and she didn't want to do that.

She held her hand out, looking as if she might blast him.

"I know all about what happens at the festival."

"You can't stop it. There's no way anyone like you could stop a sorcerer as powerful as Gabranth."

She tried to keep her face neutral. She thought she'd heard that name before.

"Where is he and when do you plan your festival?"

He said nothing.

"If you don't answer, I'm going to use a blast of magic and melt your face."

"You can't melt my face with magic."

She leaned close to him. There was the bitter stench of magic, that of lightning in a thunderstorm, on him, more potent than she had expected. Maybe he had powerful enchantments. She tried not to think about what might've been done to create them, but her mind filled in the details anyway.

"Do you really think you know so much about magic that you believe I can't?"

"I know a sorcerer can't melt my face."

She hesitated, irritation bubbling up within her. "I'm no sorcerer." His eyes widened. She began to focus on the power within the dragon stone ring. If she had to use it, then so be it. "Now you're starting to get it. How about we start again? What is your name?"

He flicked his gaze past her before focusing on her again. She felt power nearby, and suspected that she didn't have much time before the Society appeared. She had to ask her questions quickly.

She held her hand up against his head. "Name!"

"Rendal Durge."

"And where is Gabranth?"

He didn't answer.

She started to trace out her blade of light pattern. She might not be able to melt his face, but she could blast it.

He stared at her hand, as if recognizing the pattern, but what kind of volar would recognize that?

"You can't stop it. We've already put the pieces in motion. And Gabranth won't let us fail. You can't stop this."

He started to laugh, and the feeling of magic coming around her began to build even more.

He was delaying.

She pushed her hand down onto his head, pulling on the cold, burning pain of the ring. There might be more power to deal with than she could manage with only sorcery.

He lunged.

The suddenness of it surprised her, and she stumbled back, but not before he grabbed for her.

Not for her. The enchantment in her pocket.

She tried to pull away, but he blasted her with a surge of power from his closed fist.

It was her turn to be surprised.

There had been no enchantment.

What had he worn on his wrists? Those had been enchantments, but he didn't rely *only* on enchantments.

Which meant . . .

She staggered back.

He jerked the enchantment free from her pocket, holding it out triumphantly.

He backed away down the street, moving near the other buildings.

Jayna got to her feet, readying power. She was going to have to use sorcery, or perhaps even the dragon stone. At this point, she wasn't sure which she would need to focus on.

"Thanks for bringing it back to us. Harvesting these is nearly impossible, but necessary for the festival."

She frowned. "I'll just have to take that back from you."

As she started to call on power through the dragon stone, something struck her from the opposite direction.

She had felt the power beginning to build, and an instinctive part of her forced power out, using the energy of the dragon stone ring. Pain immediately arced up her arm, and she released that energy before it kept moving any farther.

She looked over to see an impossibly handsome man approaching, dressed in a deep navy jacket and pants. He looked like some nobleman, but he carried the power of sorcery about him.

There was another man behind him—the other man she had seen in the Wandering Hen.

"Let me guess. Gabranth," Jayna said.

"A meddlesome little sorcerer," Gabranth said.

"She's not a sorcerer," Rendal said, moving closer to Gabranth.

Jayna tried to pick through her options here. The very first thing she did was send a pulse of power out through the dragon stone ring. Ceran might be able to help, but only if he could get here in time. This was what he wanted her to find, and now she was standing face to face with a dark sorcerer—more than one, if what she had felt when Rendal attacked her was right.

“No?” He tipped his head to the side. “Whom do you serve?”

His gaze drifted to her ring, and there was a knowing look in his eyes.

He knew about the Toral.

She had not heard of Toral and Sul'toral until Ceran had come for her.

She doubted very many sorcerers knew. Though she shouldn't be surprised that a dark sorcerer would know.

“Someone who knows better than to perform a festival in the middle of Nelar.”

He chuckled. “Ah. I see.” He glanced over to the others. “She thinks to avoid the temptation.” He started to laugh. “But you can feel it, can't you? It's there. Right at the edge of your understanding. All you have to do is let it fill you.”

Her heart hammered.

It was something Ceran had warned her about. He had told her that other Toral had succumbed to the darkness, falling prey to the power promised to them. And he had warned her that she needed to be careful. Otherwise, she ran the risk of it consuming her, like it had consumed others. When she felt the cold power, she believed there was something more—that temptation to draw upon it. She resisted as much as she could now.

“You're not going to—”

A burst of power looped around her, starting at her feet and writhing around the barrier that she held, starting to constrict.

It was a powerful use of magic that she did not know.

Worse, she hadn't seen him do anything. No tracing of patterns.

She hadn't spent enough time learning sorcery to understand this.

Even as it constricted, Gabranth's face did not change. He remained impassive, bored even.

He took the enchantment from Rendal. He held it out, carrying it over to Jayna and stopping just across from her. He was nearly a hand taller than her, and he radiated power. He smiled, a disarming look flashing in his eyes.

"Did you feel the pull?" His voice was soft, dangerous. "Some describe it as fighting a shadow." Darkness began to crawl free of the enchantment. It slithered toward her. She could feel it, as if the dwarding were trying to call to the darkness she could summon from the ring. "There is no way to defeat it. Once it fills you, it's already too late." He held on to the enchantment. "Perhaps we could sacrifice this one. It might bring me immense joy to let it feed upon you. I would leave your husk for your master."

Jayna tried to jerk away, but the power around her made it impossible to move. She focused on the blade of light, and sent a surge of power out from her, trying to carve through the spell he used to hold her, but it wasn't enough.

He started to laugh, but suddenly cut himself off as smoke began to drift toward them.

The power continued to constrict, encircling her and squeezing, but then it exploded, sending her backward.

She was thrown into a wall—hard enough that it collapsed around her.

Her head rang. She had managed to solidify power around her, drawing enough of the painful energy of the dragon stone so that it had protected her, but it had still nearly tore through her.

She pushed.

When it came to using the magic of the dragon stone ring, she could either infuse it into patterns the same way she did with sorcery, or she could release it uncontrollably. She chose the latter this time.

The power from the dragon stone exploded away from her.

Then there was no sign of Gabranth or the others.

Smoke continued to stream toward her though.

Eva had suddenly appeared, looking at Jayna, then behind her.

"I heard the commotion. What was that?" Eva asked, helping her to her feet.

"That was the sorcerer responsible for the Festival of Mourn—the one I think Ceran wanted us to watch out for."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn't correct Jayna. "I need you to come with me. Topher is gone."

JAYNA WOBBLLED IN PLACE FOR A MOMENT TRYING TO MAKE SURE she wasn't too injured. Pain came from where her head had struck the wall, but she had created enough of a barrier around her that she didn't think there were any other injuries. She had a bruised back and backside, but as far as she could tell, nothing more. Her legs still throbbed from where the crossbow bolt had struck her. Knowing that they were sorcerers and not merely volar explained why they had chosen the crossbow. The Society couldn't track that.

She looked down at her hand, sending another pulse through the ring, wanting to signal to Ceran.

Gabranth was too powerful for her.

The others might be as well, but he had held her easily.

And they had known him.

He would need to come and help.

She shook her head. "How could I have been so *stupid*?"

"What do you mean?" Eva asked, pulling on her wrist.

Jayna couldn't go after the sorcerers. Knowing they were in the city was enough, she figured. Ceran could find them.

Besides, if Topher was gone, she needed to go back to the market and find out what happened to him. Maybe he had just wandered off.

A troubling thought niggled in the back of her mind. They had targeted him before.

"I should have known. Ceran had warned me that there was a dark sorcerer active in the city. I thought there was just one. But it seems there are at least three. Maybe even more."

And not just volar.

What have I gotten myself into now?

"I thought they were volar?"

Jayna nodded. "So did I." And most of the volar simply chased dark magic as an easy way to access power, but not all. Some *were* powerful. Sorcerers planning a festival meant *real* power would be unleashed. It would be dangerous. "But I suspect they were masking power."

It would be useful if she could learn how to do that. There were times when she would love to use her traditional sorcery. Magic she'd learned at the Academy had uses and benefits she couldn't draw upon if she used the dragon stone ring. She might be able to do even more if she could use that power, rather than trying to call upon the energy of the ring.

What prevented her was a concern that one of the sorcerers, especially somebody from the Academy, would detect her use of power. There was always a risk. If they were to find her using it, they would force her back to the Academy, and then . . .

Then she had little doubt she would either be forced to serve at the Academy, or they would burn her magic off of her.

It was that second possibility she feared.

Sorcerers could lose their connection to magic. Everyone who trained at the Academy knew that such a thing was possible, even if none of them knew anyone who'd actually had such a thing happen to them. The kind of power she commanded, the kind of energy she now used through the dragon stone ring, was such that she wouldn't

be quite as limited, but there was still the possibility that if they stripped her of magic completely, she would lose even that.

She traced her hand over the crater of rock where Rendal had disappeared. She couldn't feel anything here. Not even a trace of magic, though she knew it had been here—a considerable amount of it.

"What are you doing? I need you to come with me. Didn't you hear what I said about Topher?"

"I heard what you said," she said, waving a hand at Eva. "But I'm trying to detect what happened here."

"Jayna!"

She looked over at Eva. "Eva, the volar isn't just a volar at all. He's a sorcerer. A *dark* sorcerer. And they have the dwarding again."

Was this why Ceran had sent her here?

He would've known I wasn't ready. Not for that.

Dark creatures were one thing. Gods, even the volar were daunting.

Going after someone with the power of sorcery was a different kind of danger.

He would've known she wasn't a dular. They were permitted, tolerated even, mostly because they were relatively harmless, and because the sorcerers found value in the kind of enchantments they could make, but Toral were a different matter altogether. If one of the sorcerers were to uncover that she was connected in the way she was—and since she had pressed her ring up against Rendal's head, she had certainly revealed that—she would become a target.

She traced her hand across the stone, probing, feeling for the heat and energy that was here, thinking that if nothing else, there might be a bit of power she could uncover. There was nothing. Just an emptiness. There had to be power here though. She might not have known what kind of spell Rendal had used to blast her, but the energy of

it was considerable—strong enough to throw her back and nearly tear through her barrier in the first place.

She breathed out slowly, letting the tension out of her, and looked around the debris. “I don’t see anything. I don’t feel anything.”

“Are you about done?” Eva asked.

She turned to Eva. “I’m checking to see if he’s left any trace of his power here.”

“And if you find it? What you going to do?”

“I’m going to . . .”

Jayna frowned. What *was* she going to do? There wasn’t anything she *could* do to chase down a sorcerer. Ceran wanted her to find dark magic, even dark creatures, but not sorcerers. She had no interest in revealing her presence out in the world. Anything she did would have to be limited.

She breathed out slowly, shaking her head. “Fine. I suppose I wouldn’t do anything. Not to a sorcerer.”

Even though this was a sorcerer who obviously didn’t follow the Society, she had to be careful.

“Show me what happened to Topher,” Jayna said.

Eva motioned for her to follow, and Jayna trailed after her through the street. She jogged, pain flaring briefly in her thigh before tamping down. She wondered how injured she still was from the crossbow bolt the night before, though she managed to ignore most of that pain. If she left it without rest for much longer, it wouldn’t heal.

Now she had to worry about other injuries. Her back throbbed where she’d landed on the stone, and she tried to shake that pain off, but it was considerable. She jogged quite a bit farther than she thought she would need to. How far had she run after the volar—sorcerer?

She had to stop thinking of him as a volar. Not only was he a sorcerer, but a sorcerer in pursuit of some darker power. Here she had feared the magic from the ring, but he was after something different. Dangerous. It was the kind of power Ceran warned her about.

As they jogged, Eva looked over to her, her brow wrinkled.

"It is possible that Topher just ran off," Jayna said.

"Possible, but I saw one of the men from the other night. The thin one."

Jayna nodded slowly. "He was with Gabranth. They must've been in the market."

But why there?

What would Gabranth have needed in the market?

The answer came to her: supplies.

They were going to perform sorcery. Some kinds of sorcery involved simple patterns. The kinds she used in her attack spells were like that. She could trace them out, infuse them with power, and release enough energy to accomplish whatever goals she had in mind. Others were used differently. They involved complicated patterns and items found in nature. The most complex—and the most powerful—combined the two. Sometimes they also used incantations that added to the spell.

They had to be in search of supplies for the festival.

And Topher had disappeared—probably abducted by Gabranth and his sorcerers.

Gods, how did she get herself involved in this? She wasn't ready. Chasing dark creatures was one thing, but facing a dark sorcerer was something else, and much more than she was ready for.

They reached the market, where Eva showed her a space that Jayna began to examine, walking around it. Nearby were other vendors, many of them selling food, including the woman who sold bread, which Topher had mentioned before. The Urguin watched them, saying nothing, and Jayna looked over to him, feeling a hint of curiosity, but she ignored that while she examined the ground.

"This is where he was?" she asked, without looking up.

"This is the last place I saw him. I don't know what happened after here," she said.

Jayna took a deep breath, and she again probed with the dragon stone ring, but she added a hint of other magic to it as well. She used some of her sorcery, a bit of a tracking spell, but came up with nothing. It was blank. Emptiness. Nothing more than just the void of power.

What was going on here?

She had the tracking enchantment he'd given her, but when she pulled it out and pushed a little magic into it, she felt nothing. So much for him having any useful power.

"Why do you think they would've come back after him?" Jayna asked.

"I'm afraid of what was here," Eva said. She crouched down and traced her hand across the surface of the ground, running in a small spiral. "I can feel something. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but there is a bit of energy here. I don't know what to make of it. I have never felt anything quite like it before."

Jayna looked down, locking eyes with Eva. "We are going to have to talk about what you have detected before. And about what you might remember. I can help you."

"This isn't the time," Eva said.

"When is it going to be the time? Eventually, you and I are going to need to have a real conversation."

And as much as Eva might fear the true nature of her power, might fear learning who—and *what*—she was, it might come down to Eva needing to learn. Especially if she were able to pick up on things Jayna couldn't. If Eva were going to stay with her, she was going to need to relearn everything she knew, and she was going to need to use it, if only so they could keep each other safe.

Eva stayed with Jayna for her own safety, but she might be able to help Jayna stay safe as well.

"Not now," Eva whispered.

She stood, motioning for Jayna to follow.

She headed over to the Urguin cart. It was a different structure than most of them. It looked to be a wagon cart that had folded up to create a tabletop, and a window was open so the Urguin could stand inside. He was small and thin, with dark hair and narrow eyes, and standing close to him, Jayna had a sense of energy coming off of him, something she only detected around those who use magic.

"Why did you bring me here?" Jayna asked Eva.

Eva looked at the Urguin man. "Tell him." She said something rapidly in a harsh and rapid tongue. Urguin.

The man's eyes widened for a moment, and he turned to Jayna. "You search for dwaring." He had a slow and deliberate way of speaking, as if he weren't comfortable with her language.

Jayna glanced over to Eva for a moment before turning her attention back to the man. "We do. Do you know about them?"

"Dangerous. They feed." He looked around, nodding behind her, and Jayna turned to see that he was looking in the direction of the shadowed part of the market that Topher had mentioned. "Unusual in this land. Not unusual in mine. We know them. Get powerful. Grow."

"They were here?"

"Here. Gone. Do not chase. Far too dangerous."

She glanced over to Eva for a moment. "Somebody brought dwaring to the market?"

Eva nodded. A hint of smoke trailed from her mouth, and it worked its way toward the Urguin. "Not somebody." She nodded to the Urguin. "He doesn't really want to talk about it, but he was directed here with them."

"We would've known about dark power," she said, twisting the ring on her hand. At least, she would have expected to have known about dark power. Why would she not have detected it?

Unless it had to develop. Evolve.

It had to feed.

And now there were sorcerers intending to use the dwarding.

"How many?" she asked the Urgan.

"They should not have come. I didn't know what I carry. Vases sealed and locked."

"How many?"

"I don't know." His voice was still pinched, and she struggled to understand his accent.

Eva said something to him in his Urgan tongue, and smoke trailed out of her mouth again as she did.

He answered quickly.

His face had gone pale. It might have been Eva's magic, but it might have been something else.

"How many?"

"Seven, as far as he knows. Maybe more, maybe less, but it seems a reasonable number."

"And now the sorcerers have the dwarding." Once they fed, they would escape their hosts, and dark power would be freed. Incredible power. The Festival of Mourn.

She had to find them.

And she had to get Ceran involved. She couldn't do this by herself anymore.

JAYNA STOOD IN THE KITCHEN OF THE SMALL HOME, LEANING against the counter. She was tired, far more so than she would have thought. She had been using magic, searching through different spells in the book she'd borrowed from Char, spells she thought she might use to track Rendal, but had so far uncovered nothing. Exhaustion began to work through her. She needed rest.

They had alerted the city guards that Topher had been abducted, describing the abductors as carefully as she could, but she doubted they would be able to do much for him.

And she suspected they didn't have much time.

From what she had overheard in the Wandering Hen, the festival was going to happen soon.

Involving dwarding in the festival meant there would be considerable power released.

Maybe too much power for her.

She looked at the ring. Where was Ceran?

"Let's talk through this again," Jayna said, looking over at Eva. "As far as you were able to determine from the Urgan"—and she wondered just what the Urgan knew, if anything—"the dwarding will continue to grow and become

more powerful. With enough energy, they would do what, exactly?"

Eva sat in one of the chairs near the hearth. She had a glass of wine in hand and the bottle resting on a table next to her. "I don't know."

"Whatever they do after they grow will likely allow them to attain more power. I don't know all that much about these festivals, only that it helps them harness that dark power so they can use it."

"I have some memories of something similar," Eva said, tipping back her wine. "They are faint though." She swirled the wine again, taking a long sip. It was her second glass this evening. Jayna was tempted to stay near the cupboards to prevent Eva from getting more than one bottle. There were plenty of nights when she would drink multiple bottles, though she rarely became severely intoxicated. "I wish I knew more. I think I could be more helpful if I did."

"You don't have dark magic," Jayna said.

Eva looked over. "What is my magic but pain?"

She spoke so rarely of it that Jayna wanted nothing more than to reassure her, but she didn't know how. "It's not dark."

"I've told you the same about yours, but you believe me no more than I can believe you." Eva turned away, swirling her wine and sipping at it.

Jayna didn't have anything to say to her to counter her fears. She didn't think what Eva did was dark magic, much like she didn't want to believe the power she used through the dragon stone ring was dark magic, but what if they both were?

"We need to stop the festival," Jayna said.

Eva just nodded.

It was times like these when Jayna knew not to push too hard. Times like these when she understood Eva needed to be left alone. She would work through it.

Jayna wished she could speed up her friend's recovery and wished there were some way she could help her find those memories. Too often, the memories she came up with were ones that left Eva feeling as if she were dangerous.

Jayna took a seat at the kitchen table, flipping through the pages of the spellbook. It had been a long time since she had one, since she had used it to try to find any magic that might be of value to her. Her time in the Academy had taught her how to use and access magic quite well—at least, well enough that she didn't have to worry about gaining control over it when she wanted—but in the weeks and months since taking on the power of the Toral and the dragon stone ring, Jayna had not needed the same focus. She had become more reliant upon the power of the dragon stone ring, and she had been able to use that to perform different feats of magic than she would have while at the Academy.

To stop the festival, she needed more traditional magic, but while that would help, it wouldn't solve all of it.

Jayna took a deep breath, letting it out as she flipped through the pages. She was tired. So very tired. It took a lot of energy and focus in order for her to work through the spellbook, her mind rolling through each of the spells, testing the intention behind them, and trying to determine whether there was anything she might be able to use them for. Most of the spells were easy enough for her to focus on, but not all of them. Some of them required a very different approach.

"I haven't found any tracking spell," she said. "I keep thinking I might be able to use the enchantment Topher gave me, but even that hasn't been that helpful."

If she could add to it, maybe it would be.

"Keep looking," Eva said.

"Is there anything you could do?"

Eva opened her eyes, swirling the wine and looking down in the glass. She lifted the bottle and poured more,

filling her glass almost completely.

"Nothing that would work for your kind."

Her kind.

There were times when Jayna thought Eva remembered her past, but then she looked over, saw the emptiness in her eyes, and didn't think she really did. "What, then?"

Eva ignored her and took a long drink of wine, staring back at the fire.

Jayna sighed and turned her attention to the spellbook again.

She had to find something within its pages. There had to be something there, some way for her to track Rendal. He was the only one she had gotten close enough to for her to be able to track. She had felt the energy coming off of him, the magic he possessed, so she could use that, if only she could summon enough power to do so.

If Ceran still didn't answer, there was another alternative she could attempt. Not that she necessarily wanted to go to the Society, but the Festival of Mourn was too big for her. It was more than what she could do on her own.

The Society might move too slowly though. And if they uncovered anything about her, and her involvement with dark magic, she feared what they might do to her.

"You're thinking about going to Char, aren't you?" Eva asked.

"I'm considering it. I don't want to get him involved in this, but I might need help if Ceran doesn't respond." She twisted the ring on her finger. "He doesn't usually take this long getting back to me when I need him."

"Then go to the Society. You need help. They want to stop dark magic. It seems like you are refusing the obvious help."

"You know, you could help."

"I am helping."

"And I'm going to keep looking for my own answers," Jayna said.

She continued flipping through the pages. There were some spells she hadn't practiced since she was first in the Academy. Though most of them were fairly easy, others were more complicated and beyond what she'd learned during her Academy days.

She closed her eyes, rubbing her temples. When she did, she could feel the distant linking she shared with Char. He was out there, and she didn't have the sense he had moved.

He was still at the outpost, which she shouldn't be surprised by. She didn't expect he would have gone anywhere. At least he hadn't been sent out of the city. She supposed she should be thankful for that. She still worried about whether her influence upon him would get him in trouble, but she didn't intend for it to.

She opened her eyes, and began to flip through the pages again. There would have to be something here. There were plenty of tracking spells, many of them simple, designed for easy sorts of tracking, but some of the spells were more complicated. The more complicated the spell, the more powerful and potent it would become. The trickier the pattern, the easier it would be for her to trust it would work.

When it came to finding Rendal, a sorcerer who wanted to hide, she suspected she needed a very specific type of spell. She needed a magic detection spell, but finding a good, useful one involved more than just magic. It required a certain level of technique, as well as ingredients she wasn't sure she had access to.

Jayna wished she could go to Char. Maybe then she could question him about the right kind of tracking spell, ask him what might be effective.

She paused at one of the pages, frowning and staring at it for a few moments before she understood the spell's purpose, but when she did, she realized it could work.

"Did you find something?" Eva asked. She stood in between the stuffed chairs and the kitchen, wobbling in place while holding on to both the bottle of wine and her full glass.

"I might have," she muttered.

"What?"

"I don't know if it's going to be easy for me to do. That's the challenge here."

"Magic isn't always easy," Eva said.

Jayna chuckled, though she didn't say the thought that came to mind. Eva never talked about her magic. Even now she doubted Eva would do so.

"It requires a few different ingredients I don't know how to find."

"Such as?"

"Well, I think an iron nail shouldn't be terribly difficult to locate." At least, it wouldn't be in any place other than Nelar. Here, where everything was made of stone, it might be a bit tricky. "But a lock of lost love's hair?" She shook her head. "I haven't had a whole lot of love, so I haven't had a whole lot of experience losing it."

"Maybe your brother?"

She chuckled. "I suppose that would work, if I had any hair of his. He certainly is lost." And if the tracking spell were to work, maybe she could use it on Jonathan.

Of course, that involved her using it on somebody who had no magic. Her brother had nothing magical to him, but that didn't mean he lacked the possibility for it. Given that *she* did, she suspected he had some ability, whether or not he had taken the time to try to use it.

"What else?"

"The last thing is the hardest."

"What is that?"

"Fairy fingers."

Eva stumbled over to the table, setting her wineglass down and looking at her. She glanced to the book for a

moment before shaking her head, then picking up the wineglass and taking a long sip. "What do you think fairy fingers are?"

She sighed. "The only thing I can think of is an old term."

Of course, a book of sorcery would be *just* the kind of place that would use the term "fairy fingers." It seemed like dark magic, but maybe it was simply spiteful magic.

"What is it?" Eva asked.

"The El'aras." She shook her head. "There was a time when people called them fairies, believing they were descended from the gods themselves."

"I believe the El'aras would tell you they are."

"Just because they have magic doesn't mean they're descended from the gods."

"I suppose not," Eva said.

"And I don't even know if that's what I'm to make of it." More than that, she couldn't imagine the idea of capturing an El'aras and finding a way of using their fingers.

"What are you going to do?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. All of this . . ." She rubbed her temple again, trying to fight off exhaustion.

The longer they waited, the more likely something terrible would happen to Topher and the others who were captured.

Topher had known of three others captured, and he had become the fourth, but the Urguin had mentioned at least seven dwarfing.

With sorcery, numbers tended to matter. Patterns tended to matter. Having seven people, all with some sort of magical ability—something she suspected but didn't know with any certainty—was significant. Especially for a festival.

Somehow, the numbers made a difference.

She focused on the ring, pulsing power through it.

Ceran hadn't responded.

"As much as I hate to do so, it might be necessary to go to the Society," Jayna said.

“Okay, then. See what Char can tell you.”

Jayna sat up straighter, resting her hands on the table. “I need you alert. You could help.”

“And I could use more wine,” she said.

Jayna sighed and pushed the book away.

Eva stumbled toward the back of the home, disappearing into one of the rooms. Hopefully she hadn’t stashed any wine there. It was possible she had her own private stores. Somehow, Jayna was going to have to keep her from drinking her way through everything.

All Jayna needed was a little bit of sleep. Even if she didn’t go back to her room to get it, having a few moments would help. She settled her head down on the table, her breathing slowed, and she drifted for a few moments.

Not for long though.

Her finger started to twitch. Pain flared in the finger, and she sat up, looking down at the ring. The dragon stone glowed softly.

“Finally,” she muttered.

Of course he would summon when she was exhausted.

She glanced to the back of the home. Eva had remained there. That was for the best. She didn’t need Eva coming out while she was wandering the streets looking for Ceran.

She stuffed the spellbook back into one of the cupboards in the kitchen and grabbed her cloak, slipping it on before heading out into the growing darkness.

It was late. She’d been studying the entire afternoon and still hadn’t found anything. This, after staying up the whole night before, only getting a few hours of sleep in the morning. Now she didn’t feel as if she could sleep, knowing that if she were to do so, she left Topher to whatever fate the sorcerers intended for him.

The ring pulsed.

It was a steady sort of pulsing, one that guided her along the street; Jayna had long ago learned how to follow the drawing. If he was here, then he would be easy enough for

her to find. He didn't typically send a summons if he were difficult to uncover.

She let out a long sigh as she trailed through the streets. The ring continued to pulse, the power in it quickening. It was a constriction around her finger, a steady tapping. It increased in intensity the longer she walked, and soon she neared the outskirts of the city.

Of course it would be on the western edge of the city, near the Hester Square Market, near the forest.

The ring continued to constrict. It squeezed her finger almost continuously now, a steady pressure around her index finger. The entirety of the dragon stone had grown warm, and as heat radiated off of it, Jayna could practically feel the magic seeping out of the ring, pouring out from her.

A dark shadow emerged from the forest, striding toward her.

"Ceran. I wish you would have responded earlier. Don't you know I need to sleep?"

He was about a foot taller than her, and impossibly handsome. He had flowing blond hair and crystal blue eyes. The first time she had met him, she'd believed he was one of the El'aras as he seemed to have many of their features, though he had denied it. The El'aras were too proud to deny their identity, so she didn't think that was the case, but wondered if perhaps he had some way of hiding his heritage.

"And I need to speak with you."

"I've been trying to reach you." Fatigue made her snarkier than she intended. She had to be careful with Ceran. He was a powerful Sul'toral, and he had access to incredible artifacts that granted him power—possibly dark power. She didn't really understand the nature of his magic, only that it was real, and it was incredible. "It took you long enough to answer my request. I thought I'd only found a volar, but . . ."

Ceran chuckled again. He had a warm, rich tone to his laugh, but there was an undercurrent of something more menacing beneath it. It was that undercurrent that left her a bit concerned, and more than a bit terrified.

"More than a volar, isn't it, Jayna Aguelon?"

He said her name almost possessively, and she cringed, ignoring it.

"You know the issue. I'm not ready for this. Dark creatures are one thing, but sorcerers are beyond me."

"I had warned you there were going to be dark sorcerers involved."

"I knew that," she started. She headed toward him, thankful she could at least see him this time. "But I expected you to answer when I found them."

His face darkened slightly. "I hadn't expected you to come across them so soon."

"They're planning a festival."

He grunted. "They often do."

"There are several sorcerers involved. And dwarfing." She watched him, expecting some sort of response. "And they're led by a sorcerer named Gabranth."

That caught his attention more than anything else.

"Are you certain?"

"You know him. He seemed to know you."

"He knows of me. He does not know me. But he, unfortunately, is not without talent." He took a deep breath. "Gabranth Inarit. Once one of the most talented within the Society." He shook his head. "I imagine they don't speak of him any longer."

"I've not heard of him."

"No. I suppose you would not have. If he is here, and if they are to perform that festival, then we will have to intervene. He has long been thought to serve an even greater power, one of the most dangerous. A creature known as Asymorn."

"Creature?"

“Would it be easier if I called him a being?”

“Who is Asymorn?”

She'd not heard the name, but she had learned from her time with Ceran that there were many names he knew that she had never heard about.

“There was a time when stories of Asymorn filled many lands. Terrifying stories. He is one of incredible power. Dark power. And Gabranth, and those who serve him, celebrate that power. They would free it again.”

“What do you mean they ‘celebrate’ it?”

“To them, Asymorn is something of a god, and they would reach for his power if they could. If he were freed from his prison, it would usher in a time of great darkness and violence. Much like when he was last freed—a time when many suffered and died.”

Jayna's mouth went dry. “So, this Asymorn has those who celebrate him—”

“Celebrants. That is what they call themselves. It makes it sound less horrific than it is. Much less horrific than it will be if Asymorn were released.”

“And you said he’s not a god?”

“Not a god. A being of power. But incredible power.” He sighed. “When he was last unleashed, he put this entire continent under his control. In addition to the darkness and violence, it was a time when many of the dark creatures you now hunt were created.” He shook his head again. “If he were to get free again, there will be much devastation. He would start here, and then he would spread beyond.”

“So now you need to stop him.”

“Gabranth must be stopped before he succeeds in freeing Asymorn. And I assure you he could succeed. There are few sorcerers with the necessary power to release Asymorn, but Gabranth is one.”

Jayna thought of what she had felt when he had attacked her. He had felt powerful.

"And what about this?" She pulled the scrap of paper out of her pocket that Topher had on him—the one with the same symbol on it that had been found near her brother.

"This is Gabranth's symbol. It's a marking for his power. Where did you get this?"

"The sorcerers here. And . . ." She debated telling him about her brother; Ceran might be able to help. "And my brother sent a letter with the same symbol."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why would he have gotten caught up with Gabranth?"

"I don't know."

Ceran fell silent for a moment, and he stared off into the distance. "Find out what you can about the festival. When it will take place. Where it will take place. Then alert me."

"You aren't going to go after Gabranth?"

If they truly intend to free Asymorn, there is something more I must do first. You will take care of this. Find Gabranth so you can find out about the festival. I cannot trust what must be done to anyone else."

"I'm not ready for this."

"You are as ready as you can be. Unfortunately, you might not be as ready as you must be."

She had hoped he would offer her something more useful than that, but he smiled at her, and it was a strange smile.

If she was going to have to deal with sorcerers, then there was something he could do for her. "You know, it would be helpful if I knew how to do some more powerful magic."

"I have shown you several different useful spells."

"Nothing that was useful when he used his snake spell on me."

Ceran tipped his head to the side, frowning. "Snake spell?"

"Something that constricted around me."

"Ah. We called it something else when I was learning, but I can understand how that one can be difficult. The making of it is not that complex." He traced out a series of symbols. It was almost as if he were writing in runes in front of him, but she didn't know what he was spelling out until he pushed just a hint of power into it, creating a soft glow that hung in the air. She could recreate that pattern. "Once formed, then you can use it much like this."

As he powered the spell, it slithered, working its way around her, starting at her feet and continuing up her body, until it continued to squeeze and constrict.

"The simplest answer is to carve through it."

"I tried," Jayna said through gritted teeth.

"A sharp edge," he said. "And you don't need to trace out your patterns when you know them well."

She focused on the blade of light. Could she create it without drawing the patterns?

She held them in her mind. And then she pushed out power.

It was blunt, but if she focused the edge . . .

And then it exploded.

She stumbled forward.

"Does that help?"

"Maybe," she said. "But I won't be able to stop him."

"You just need to find out about the festival. Do you think you can do that?"

"There is a spell I have found. It should work."

"Very well. Let me know what you learn, Jayna." Ceran turned away, heading back into the forest once again and disappearing.

The dragon stone ring stopped squeezing, no longer constricting her finger.

Jayna stood for a moment, testing the blade of light in her mind again and again until she felt as if she could hone it to a sharp edge.

When she felt comfortable that she could, she headed back to her home. It was time to get some sleep. First, though, she might have to send word to Char and the Society. She didn't have to look for Gabranth on her own.

JAYNA KNEW EVERYTHING AROUND HER WAS A DREAM. THERE WAS no way it was anything other than that, but she still enjoyed it. Within the dream, she was back in an easier time, a simpler time. Back to when she was still with her brother, and her parents still lived, and her family was still together.

She remembered.

In the dream, she sat next to the hearth, the warm crackling flames pressing upon her back; there was an energy to them that reminded her now of the power of the dragon stone ring, but at the time, the flames simply provided comfort. She leaned forward, moving the small stones across the game board, and hazarded a glance up to her brother, finding him smiling at her.

Jonathan was a few years older than her, always quick with a smile and a clever quip, eager to show her just how little she knew. She'd always looked up to her big brother, so it was easy for her to let him prove just what he could do. Not that she ever minded. Mostly because he always smiled as he did it, always teased her just a little bit, so that she found it endearing more than anything else.

"You can't play it that way," Jonathan said, moving the stone. "You have to plan. Anticipate." He leaned over the small board, a square of lacquered wood, carefully painted

by Jonathan and decorated with his own embellishments. He had asked their parents for a board for a long time, but their father had never been willing to make one, nor had he been willing to buy one from Master Tanner, the local craftsman in their section of the city. Jonathan had taken it upon himself to create something of his own, and she thought it was better than anything that could have been bought anyway. It might not be as neatly painted as Master Tanner would have made it, but the decorations on each square were far nicer, even if the colors weren't quite as bright and vibrant.

"Look at what I do here. You see how I place my stones around the board? It's all about the placement. I can see the way you intend to move, and know what you might do with your next move, or the one after—and when you get really good, even the one after that. I can start to plan on how to maneuver so that I position my pieces to block what you do with this move, and what you do with the next one as well."

Jonathan leaned back, taking a pinch of the bread resting next to him and stuffing it into his mouth. Their mother hated it when he sat near the hearth and ate, but she fell prey to Jonathan's charms, just like everyone else.

He had on his favorite deep blue jacket, though it was a bit more faded today than it had been before. The elbows were patched, though Jayna had never learned why he had needed to patch them. He'd had the jacket for quite a while, and was finally filling it out in a way that made him look like the young man he was starting to become.

"I can't think that far ahead," she muttered.

Jonathan just chuckled. "You *choose* not to think that far ahead. It's not that you can't. You can learn to do it, silly pants. If *I* can, you can."

Jayna looked at the board, realizing that if she were to make the next move like she had planned, she was going to

get trapped. Her brother had already held her in place. He was only telling her after the fact that he had done so.

It figured that Jonathan wouldn't want to lose. He never enjoyed losing.

For that matter, Jayna hated losing too.

The game was relatively simple. You had to get all your pieces on the other side of the board without your opponent trapping and holding them, removing them from the game board while you played. She'd never beaten her brother, though that wasn't for lack of trying.

"You can because you play more."

"Exactly. I play more. The more you play and practice, the better you're going to get at the game. That involves anticipating the different moves that might be made." Jonathan smiled and leaned back, running a hand through his long, wavy black hair. "You can learn this just the same as I can. Probably better. You're starting earlier than me."

Jayna looked down at the board. She wasn't sure she could learn quite as well as her brother. That didn't mean she wouldn't try. She was competitive, the same as him, and she didn't like losing, even if it *was* to Jonathan.

"Do you have any tricks?"

He winked at her. "If I did, would I share them with you?"

"You would if you cared about your sister."

He chuckled. "I care about my sister. I also know she doesn't always take the time to put the work in that she needs to."

"Hey!"

He shrugged. "You can be better than me, Jayna. I know you can. You just have to put the work in. Don't take the easy way out. When it comes to this game, figure out what the rules are, and figure out how you can work within them."

"What if I work outside of the rules?"

"That's cheating."

She stared at the board and realized something.

"Cheating, is it?"

He nodded. "That's right. I wouldn't want you to cheat while playing. There's no point in doing that. Not when you can win the right way."

She shuffled one of his stones off the side. It was the one nearest to her, close to where she had finished her last turn. In order for her brother to have positioned that stone where it was, he would've needed to have taken two turns in a row. The two stones were side by side, in a place where she would have seen it if he were to have made that move.

"Who's the one cheating now?"

"What was that?"

She tapped on the board. "Look at this, Jonathan. Did you really think I wouldn't notice?"

He leaned toward the board, examining it with mock seriousness. "I don't see what you're going on about."

"You don't, do you? You mean this stone that was played right next to mine?"

"Like I said. I don't know what you are going on about." He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest, practically daring her to challenge him.

"Is that Father?" Jayna asked.

Jonathan turned toward the door, and Jayna hurriedly moved several pieces into place, surrounding his. As soon as she was done, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, taking some of the heat off of her back from where the hearth crackled behind her, studying the board.

"That's not Father," Jonathan said. "He's been gone all day though. He should be back at any point." He turned back to look at her, studying her before turning his attention to the board. "The next thing you need to learn," Jonathan started, reaching toward the board, shifting the pieces she had just moved, "is that if you do cheat, you do need to make sure either your opponent doesn't notice, or they notice too late to be able to do anything. It's bad

enough getting caught in the act, but it's equally bad if you get caught before you can get away." He slid the pieces back to where they had been before, then waited until she looked up at him. "A smaller move is often best. You have to use simple techniques. Strategies that will give you the advantage, but won't be noticed quite as easily."

"Now you're trying to teach me how to *cheat*?"

"I'm trying to teach you how to play the game, but seeing as how you're more interested in moving your stones around without following the rules, I might as well give you a little advice on other ways of playing. Anyway."

He made his move, sliding one of his stones across the board. She couldn't do anything now. It was a definitive move—worse, she didn't know if he had cheated while playing her, or if he was really that good. Before this game, she would've said that her brother was simply more skilled than her, but after this one . . .

It was difficult to know. It was possible he simply *had* cheated to position himself into a place where he could make whatever moves he wanted and she wouldn't be any wiser.

"It's time for the two of you to get going," a voice from the kitchen said.

Jayna looked up at her mother. Her pale white apron was stained with a bit of grease, and she had a dusting of flour on one shoulder, but the twinkle was still in her eyes. Her blonde hair was tucked back underneath a headscarf. She paused in front of the stove, leaning forward and nearly losing her balance when she caught herself, covering her mouth while coughing.

Jayna glanced over to Jonathan, but he didn't pay her any attention. He didn't pay any attention these days when it came to Mother. It was almost as if he either didn't notice Mother was getting sick, or didn't care.

How could he not care though? Mother had been getting sicker the last few weeks. The cough had certainly gotten

worse. She stayed active, though, and made every effort to hide from both of them just how ill she was. Yet she couldn't hide it from Jayna. Not as well as she wanted to. Jayna was around her too much, helping her in the kitchen, cleaning up the small home they had on the outskirts of the city, and trying to keep everything as organized as possible. Their father had left for long stretches of time, and Jayna had heard her parents discussing places he'd gone to try and find a new healer.

"Get going where, Mother?" Jonathan asked.

"Well, for starters, why don't you get in here and help?"

"Help?" Jonathan said, getting to his feet and gliding to the kitchen in that way he did. There was something smooth and calculated even in that move. He was playing their mother. "I don't think you need any help. You are far too capable to need anything I could do."

"Jonathan Aguelon. If you don't get out here and start helping me now, I'm going to make sure your father has words with you when he gets back."

Jonathan chuckled, slipping his arm around their mother's waist and squeezing her. He leaned down—Jonathan had already been taller than her at barely fourteen—and kissed her on the top of her head. "I doubt Father wants you to have anybody helping you, either. He would just tell me I would mess up the cooking."

She smacked him on the chest. "You know your father would say no such thing."

"He would. He did. He knows that if I get involved in the kitchen, I'm bound to burn something. And considering how much I've seen you working, I have no interest in ruining anything."

Jayna got to her feet, heading to the kitchen and shooting her brother a frown. He winked at her again. Jayna could only shake her head. When it came to her brother and the way he managed to get out of work, even

around those who knew him best, she couldn't help but be impressed.

A pounding came at the door.

They all turned to it.

Jayna headed toward the door, but not before the pounding came again, steady and rhythmic. A beating sound that thundered.

It filled her with a hint of dread.

As she reached the door, pulling it open, she stood for a long moment, looking up at the man standing across from her. At the time, she hadn't known who he was, but she recognized the ring now, the marker for a volar—for dark magic.

Why had he come to see them?

The pounding persisted, even though he no longer knocked at the door.

"Can I help you?"

The pounding came again—steady, regular—and Jayna . .

.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes.

A dream. All of it had been a dream.

Why that scenario though?

It had been a day she would never forget. Not because of the simple pleasures of home life—a time when she had still known peace and comfort and the cozy way they had lived—but because of what had come later. It had gone from the comfort of spending the evening with her brother, playing stones with him, to watching her mother baking in the kitchen, far too aware of her steady cough, though she ignored it, to the fear she'd felt at the man's visit, learning later they had to do something for him.

Dark magic.

Jayna had learned in the Academy that her parents had been caught up in dark magic, but didn't know how—only that it had taken them from her.

It was something Jonathan never spoke to her about. It was almost as if he didn't want to acknowledge what had happened, as if he feared recognizing what had happened to them, the kind of magic they'd used.

She swung her legs off the edge of the bed, leaning there for a long moment. Why would she have that dream now?

Maybe because of everything she'd been through. Nothing so far had left her with the same feelings she'd had that day. She had gone through so many emotions. Happiness, contentedness, laughter, and all of it had been stripped away from her.

The steady pounding came again.

Jayna frowned, realizing that it hadn't only been in the dream.

She hurriedly dressed, slipping on her shoes, grabbing a dagger off the table next to the bed, and stumbled down the hallway. Pain throbbed in her thigh for a moment, but then it faded.

Why was she so tired?

When she reached the main part of the home, she stopped, trying to ascertain what she saw.

Char stood in the doorway, though that wasn't quite right. Char stood with the door closed behind him, and Eva slapped the table with a steady rhythm. She had a bottle of wine in one hand, and a shattered wineglass rested on the ground near her. She glared at Char, all while slamming her hand on the table.

"What's going on in here?" Jayna asked.

Char looked over to her. "I came to see you. I didn't realize your friend was going to be so . . . unruly."

"I'm unruly? What do you think you're doing coming here in the middle of the night?"

"It's not the middle of the night," Char said. Jayna recognized that tone. He was trying to placate her, but given the state Eva was in, he doubted she would be able to

do much. "I told you I'm only here to visit with Jayna. I didn't come here to harass you."

Eva swung the bottle toward him, slamming her fist down on the table one more time. There was a heavy thud, then a hint of smoke drifted up from where she'd struck it.

Jayna didn't know if she pulled upon much of her blood magic.

She hurried forward, thankful she'd slipped her boots on as she stumbled through the glass. "Why don't you go and take a seat by the hearth," she said to Eva.

"Take a seat?" Eva started to swing the bottle of wine toward her, and Jayna caught it, pushing it back toward her. "I'm not going anywhere. Not until he apologizes."

"What do I have to apologize for?" Char asked.

Jayna looked over to him. He had on a heavy brown cloak, the symbol of the Sorcerers' Society embroidered on the left lapel. "Why don't you just tell her you're sorry," she said.

"What do I have to . . ." Char shook his head. "I'm sorry—for however I offended you, I'm sorry."

Eva glowered at him, but then staggered over to the hearth where she sank down onto the ground in front of it, tipping back the bottle and looking in their direction before shaking her head and taking yet another drink.

Char came over. "Is it safe now?"

"I think it's always been safe," Jayna said.

"I mean, is it safe for me to come in here?"

"What are you doing here, Char?"

"I can't come and visit my friend?"

She glanced over to Eva. She rested her head against the wall near the hearth, and took another long swig of wine. Something was bothering her. Maybe it was just the dawning, watching Topher get taken, but there were far too many nights when Eva ended up drinking like this. "You can come and visit me. I'm not trying to suggest otherwise. It's

just that . . .” She turned her attention back to Char. “How did you find me?”

“I tracked you.”

“Tracked me?” Jayna grabbed the broom out of the corner and made quick work of sweeping up the glass. After she got it into a pile, she went looking for the dustpan, but needn’t have bothered. Char crouched down in front of the pile of broken glass, tracing his hands in a pattern in the air above it, then with a sudden surge of power, the glass crackled and turned to dust. Jayna watched him for a moment, shaking her head before letting out a long, trembling breath. She could have done that same magic, but she hadn’t thought of it. It wasn’t altogether uncommon that she didn’t think about using magic when she could. When it came to her sorcerer magic, she avoided it. It was safer that way. And she tried to avoid using the dragon stone ring any more than necessary. “I thought you didn’t detect the linking spell we placed.”

Char’s brow furrowed for a moment. “I don’t. Or I didn’t?” He shrugged. Getting to his feet, he wiped his hands on his pants, as if he had actually touched the glass. That elicited a slight smirk from Jayna. “I can feel it a little bit now. Or, at least, I could feel it a little bit on my way over here. I had to focus on it, and I even had to add a bit more power to it in order to call through it.”

“I wasn’t aware of you doing anything like that.”

“I don’t know that you would be. I was trying not to make it too obvious for you.”

Jayna pulled a chair out from the table, sinking down. Between this and the dream she had, it was almost as if the gods wanted to remind her of what her life might have been like had she stayed in the Academy and finished her training. Memories of her home life before everything had changed, and now having Char appear in her home, the other time when she’d been happy.

“What are you doing here?” She was still tired, and she asked it with a bit more irritation than she intended. When she glanced over to Char, he frowned at her, though he didn’t seem irritated.

“I wanted you to hear from me that I told Master Agnew about the dwarding.”

Jayna watched him for a long moment. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised that Char would betray her to the Society.

“What did he say?” Her words were soft, and she suppressed the annoyance within them.

“He's upset, of course,” Char said, turning away from her and pulling open one of her cupboards.

She was too startled to react.

Was he trying to cook for her?

Char had always enjoyed cooking. It was what made him such a skilled sorcerer, along with a healer. The techniques of cooking and sorcery were not all that different—at least, not when it came to the healing kind of sorcery Char favored. He could use the same approach he took in the kitchen to create some of the magic he used.

“I'm not entirely sure if he believes me. I had hoped to find the enchantment and show him.”

“Don't bother looking for it,” Jayna said. Char turned to her, closing one of the cupboards as he did. “One of the dark sorcerers took it from me.” She decided not to tell him that they had almost used it on her. She could still feel the way the dwarding had seemed to call to some part of the dragon stone magic she could access. She tried not to think about what that meant.

Still, even though she knew the Society needed to be involved, she had hoped it would happen under her terms.

“Then it's gone,” Char said.

“It's gone. And I need to find the one who is responsible for releasing it in the first place.”

He regarded her for a long moment. "You know, you told me why you left, but I think there's more I want to know, like why you thought you had to go outside of the Academy to find your brother. And why you didn't want to tell your best friend about what you had been doing. And why you got caught up in this kind of magic."

He looked over to Eva. Eva had her own kind of magic, and that alone was troublesome to somebody like Char, who had been so tied up in the teachings of the Academy that he believed in using only the magic they permitted. At least he didn't look down at her dragon stone ring accusatorily, though if he were to do so, she couldn't even object. She had gone in search of a different kind of magic. She had gone looking for something more powerful and potent, an easier way to power.

Maybe that was why she'd had that dream.

She'd cheated.

But she hadn't been caught. Not yet.

That was the key when it came to cheating magic like she did. That was the lesson Jonathan had taught her. Cheat carefully, and make a point of doing so in a way that others couldn't detect. Only then could she get ahead.

That was what this was all about.

She had to get ahead so she could figure out what happened to Jonathan.

"How long do I have before the Society comes for me?"

"I didn't tell them where to find you. At least, not yet."

It was a threat. That was unexpected coming from Char.

"What more do you want to know?"

Eva suddenly shouted, tipped back the bottle of wine, and took another long drink before resting it on the ground next to her. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her breathing slowed.

Jayna shook her head and reached for Char as he headed toward the cupboard where the spellbook hid. "Would you like to go somewhere else to talk?"

“What do you have in mind?”

“Anywhere but here.”

JAYNA GOT TO HER FEET AND LOOKED AROUND THE INSIDE OF THE home. Other than the broken glass Char had helped clean up, the home was actually quite tidy. Much like Char had alluded to, they didn't have much in the cabinets. There hadn't really been a need. They rarely entertained, and it was mostly just the two of them in the home. When they had others coming to them for help, they limited them to staying out in the main part of the home, and then only long enough for Jayna to offer whatever aid she could before sending them on their way.

Her stomach grumbled. She was hungry, and she suspected it wasn't quite that late, so she figured she had time to go get some food. Eating might help clear her mind—as would talking with Char, she had to admit—and give her a little bit of focus on what she needed to do.

Figure out how to perform the tracking spell, which was the most challenging of all, then find Topher and the other missing people.

If she could find Rendal, then she was convinced she could figure out what they were up to and where the Festival of Mourn would take place. Once she did that, she could stop it. She certainly had to do so before whatever Ceran feared took place.

"Can you help me with Eva?" She headed over to the hearth, prying Eva's hand off of the wine bottle and propping her up for a moment as she leaned behind her.

Char approached slowly. "She's not going to come around again, is she?"

"Do you really think a little drunk girl is going to hurt you?"

"She might be little, and she might be drunk, but I *do* think she could hurt me."

Jayna grinned up at him, grabbing Eva underneath her arms. "You're probably right. She's stronger than she looks."

"It's not about how strong she looks." His face darkened and he wrinkled his brow, clearing his throat. "It's about the kind of magic she has."

"You don't have to worry about her magic."

"Jayna, I'm not dumb. I saw what she did."

"I would never say you were dumb, Char."

"Then do you want to tell me what she can do?"

She looked up at Char. He squeezed his hand and then relaxed while watching Eva, but he didn't lean down and grab Eva's feet.

Jayna started dragging her. "I don't know what kind of magic she can do." There was no point in denying that Eva could do magic. Char had been standing in the doorway long enough that he would have seen it. Even if he hadn't, he had been there when they had taken the dwarfing out of Topher. He had seen the power that had been required, and then he must have seen what Eva had done to the enchantment. "All I know is that she needs my help."

"I thought you said she needed your help—past tense."

Jayna's gaze darted to the wine bottle. "She did, and I think she still does," she added softly.

Char sighed then grabbed Eva's feet, lifting them. "I've never seen anything like what she can do."

"Me neither," she said.

"How long has she been with you?"

Jayna shook her head. "Almost from the beginning."

"Is that how you got your . . . abilities?"

She nearly stumbled. "No. I can't do the same things she does." She wouldn't even know where to begin. Jayna doubted there was anything to the blood magic Eva used that could be transferred and shared with another. Even if there were, she wasn't sure she would be willing to try it. Eva looked uncomfortable, practically in pain, each time she tried to use her magic. She had no interest in experiencing something similar.

They reached one of the back rooms, barely enough light from the front rooms drifting back to guide her, and she and Char helped position Eva on the bed. She pulled back the sheets, tucking her in, and smoothed her dark hair back from her head. Her pale skin seemed to reflect some hidden light.

"Come on," Jayna said, motioning for Char to follow her out of the room.

"Why is she like that?" he asked, once they were back in the main part of the room.

"Why is she like what? Suspicious?"

"Drunk."

"I don't know," Jayna said. She took the bottle of wine from where Eva had left it near the hearth and carried it to the kitchen. There wasn't any remaining. She didn't know if this was the first or second bottle Eva had for the night, but given her level of intoxication, she suspected the latter. Typically, when she had only a single bottle of wine, Eva had been able to function much better than this. "She gets like this from time to time. She doesn't explain herself, and I haven't asked her to."

"Don't you worry about why?"

Jayna glanced toward the back room. "I know why." He looked over at her. "She lost something of herself with her injury that she's still trying to get back." That seemed the

easiest way to describe it, even if it weren't entirely accurate. "And I worry about what she lost and why," she said softly. "But I also recognize I can't do anything about it."

It was more than the injury. Eva hadn't been willing to reveal what she had remembered, and given that Jayna had her own demons to deal with, she had no interest in pushing Eva too much. If the woman wanted to talk, eventually she would. If she didn't, then she wouldn't. It was a simple matter.

"Are we going to get something to eat, or are you going to keep pushing me on my friend?"

"I don't know. I figured I could keep pushing you on your friend."

Jayna smiled. "It's going to be a short conversation, then. I don't have much more I can tell you."

"How about if I start pushing you on what you've been doing."

"That I can handle."

She motioned for him to follow, and they headed toward the door. She closed and locked it. She didn't worry that somebody would try to break in, but if Eva were to get up, she would find the door locked and, hopefully, wouldn't try to head out into the night. That was the last thing she wanted. She didn't want to have to go searching for Eva while the woman was intoxicated.

Somehow, she was going to have to get through to Eva. She needed for her friend to have clarity of thought, especially if it came down to trying to remove these dweaving. Jayna had no idea if she could do it on her own. She might need Eva to help. For that matter, she might need a sorcerer like Char.

"Where would you have us go?" Char asked.

"There's a place not too far from here."

She hurried along the streets. They were empty for the most part, though there were a few people out. She

watched for any strange movement, and stayed connected to the magic within her dragon stone ring, testing for any signs of power that might push upon her. She had to be careful with that. Gabranth knew she was in the city, and he knew about Ceran. She no longer feared only the Society detecting her, as now there was this dark sorcerer she had to watch out for.

"What are you looking for?" Char asked, leaning over her shoulder and twisting his head in the same direction as hers.

She gave him a hard shove. "I'm not looking for anything."

"You're looking at something. I see the way your gaze is drifting along the road. You look jumpy. You were never the most settled before, but now you seem practically on edge."

Jayna forced a tight smile. How could she acknowledge that she was on edge? How could she acknowledge that everything she had seen and encountered since leaving the Academy had made her that way? She had experienced dangers in the world. Some of those dangers had come from her own choices, the way she had pursued power, looking for more access to it that would help her track down dark magic—and her brother. But part of those dangers came from some of the things she had seen.

There had been jobs Ceran had required of her. Some of them had been easy. When she'd first started working with him, he'd made a point of giving her tasks she could complete quickly and easily. The first assignment had been finding a dangerous enchantment and taking it back from the volar who wanted to use it. But the longer she'd worked with him, the more complicated and dangerous those tasks became, taking her against increasingly darker creatures. Now . . .

"I *am* on edge," she finally said.

"Is it what happened with your friend?"

“That’s just Eva. She’s been like that before. I can deal with her drunken nights.” She *could* deal with them, but she also had to figure out whether she could offer Eva anything more that would help her regain her memories.

She’d helped her once, but helping her with this, through whatever challenges she now dealt with, was something else entirely.

“Not that friend. The other one. The one you brought to the outpost.”

Jayna shrugged, looking over at Char. In the faint streetlight, he cut a more rugged figure than he did in the brighter light. He was always handsome, but he seemed a more studious handsome when he was inside, whereas outdoors she could almost imagine him wandering the streets, prowling the way her brother had. Not that she had ever been attracted to men like her brother. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Jayna tried to stay away from men who reminded her too much of Jonathan. She knew what could happen.

“He isn’t so much a friend. He just showed up at my doorstep, but I’m concerned about him, as well.”

They reached the tavern where she had intended to bring him. It was a wide building, two stories with rooms available to rent above it. The food was good, the music played until late in the evening, and she had learned that the ale flowed plentifully, and was always of a decent quality. If nothing else, Eva had taught her to find high-quality wine and ale. Of course, when it came to Eva, there were times when she wanted high quality, and there were times when she didn’t care. Sometimes, all Eva wanted was to get intoxicated so she didn’t have to think about anything else.

She leaned on the door, looking over at Char. “This is going to be different from your experiences within the outpost.”

“How do you know anything about my experiences at the outpost?”

“I can imagine what they’re like.”

She pushed open the door. The sound of music and stomping feet caught her immediately. A heavy smoke filled the air—that of the woodfire in the hearth, the pipes some of the men in the tavern smoked, even that of incense burning—mingling amongst the people dancing and singing. All of it gave off a ribald, vibrant energy.

She pushed past a hulking man and he shot her a glare. She shrugged, pushing him again as he got too close, this time forcing a bit of magic through the dragon stone ring so that when he tried to get near her again, he stumbled backward, tripping and falling on his backside. His eyes widened, and he shook his head before slowly ambling to his feet and turning away.

“Was that necessary?” Char asked.

“I don’t know if it was necessary, but it certainly was deserved. The bastard thought to push me over on his way out.”

“That ‘bastard’ was clearly drunk,” he said.

“That doesn’t make it better.”

She found a table near one of the corners. Not all the way in the corner as she preferred, but near enough so that she could watch the dance floor and the kitchen, as well as the front door. She waved to one of the servers, a dular woman named Bessie whom she had come to know. She was probably ten years older than Jayna, had minor abilities, but she made sure to use them so she could keep herself safe in a place like the Able Angler.

Bessie hurried over, carrying a tray laden with drinks and food, glancing over to Char before turning her attention to Jayna. Rings of metal circled both arms all the way up to her elbows. She had other rings on her fingers, and still more as earrings.

“What do you need, Jayna?”

"A drink. Some food. And whatever he wants."

"What about Eva?"

"Eva won't be joining us tonight," she said.

"I see. One of those?"

Jayna nodded. "One of those. Unfortunately."

Bessie chuckled. "You can't get too mad at that girl. She's been through a lot."

"I wouldn't know."

Bessie's brow furrowed. "I suppose I don't either. She just has that look about her, you know? Something that seems to scream that she's been through something. I figured you knew what it was."

Jayna shook her head slowly. "She keeps that to herself. She keeps quite a bit to herself."

"A woman's prerogative," Bessie said. She glanced to Char. "What about you, big boy? What do you want?"

"I suppose ale and some food as well."

"You 'suppose'? How am I expected to get you anything if you just 'suppose'?"

He chuckled. "I'll just have cheese and hard cider."

"Better. That's all I needed to know."

Jayna just laughed. "Busy place tonight."

"It's the minstrels. I can't deny they're entertaining, but I don't like the crowd they bring in." She paused, looking to the minstrels in the corner playing "Carry Me Lovely," an old song about a man and his horse. "Not that they ever ask me what I like. 'Get in here,'" she said. "'Do your work. Clean the tables. Entertain the men. Make sure you give them what they need.'"

"You do good work though. I'm sure they appreciate that."

Bessie wrinkled her nose. "They appreciate it, but it would be nice if I didn't have to take care of so many stinking river men."

"It *is* called the Able Angler," Jayna said.

"Don't you go siding with them too. Everybody takes it so damn literally, as if they need to come in here stinking like the work they do. It wouldn't hurt some of these men to take a bath, you know."

"I'm sure," Jayna said with a smirk.

Bessie leaned toward Char. "At least this one don't stink nearly as much as most of them. You've got better taste than most," she said.

"Don't tell him that," Jayna said. "Wouldn't want him to get a big head."

"Is that what you're concerned about? He looks too pretty to get a big head."

"You think I'm pretty?" Char asked.

"Maybe I did," Bessie said, watching him for a moment. "Maybe I didn't, though. You keep smarting off at me, and you might find your food comes out a little slow."

"He didn't mean anything by it," Jayna said. "He's just a little simple."

Bessie leaned back, propping the tray on her shoulder. "I can see that. He looks to be a little simple. Now, if you don't mind, I've got to go and deliver these orders to a few of these other rowdy tables. I'll be back to you soon."

She darted off through the crowd, leaving Jayna just shaking her head and laughing.

"Is she always like that?"

"Often enough. She really does have a challenging job."

"I wouldn't know."

"Have you ever watched the waiters at these places? She has to keep some men from groping her, others from getting too drunk so they don't pay, and she has to keep fights from breaking out, all while moving through the tavern, getting drinks and food and . . ."

There were times when Jayna thought her own work was challenging, but when she came and visited the Able Angler, and saw Bessie or any of the other women who worked in

the tavern, she realized that what she did wasn't *always* as bad as she thought.

"Are you going to keep talking about your friend, or do you want to tell me what happened to you?"

Jayna took a deep breath, looking over at Char. She couldn't get him too angry, not if she wanted to get what she thought she could use from him. "What more do you need to know?"

"Maybe you tell me what happened?"

"I already told you what happened. You listen about as well as you did back when we were in the Academy."

"And you answer questions just about as well as you did when we were there," Char said, grinning at her.

Jayna sighed. It felt good having this banter with Char again. It felt like it had been too long. There had been a time when the two of them had sat around tables in the library, studying, laughing too loudly and drawing the attention of some of the librarians, but that had only made them laugh even more. They had always studied well together, and sitting with him now and having an opportunity to reconnect felt . . . right.

If there was anything she could say about the time since she'd left the Academy, it was that everything had felt off for her. Jayna hadn't quite been able to pin down why, but the more she dug herself into her work serving as a Toral, the more separated she felt from the kind of magic and power she wanted to learn. It was a separation that had left her feeling a longing for what could and should have been.

"All of this was about Jonathan," she said softly, leaning forward on the table. She lowered her voice, despite the noise in the tavern. That was what she could tell him—not about the dark magic she felt she needed to pursue. "He was in danger. I was sure of it. And I did everything I could to help him."

"I know you did," Char said. "At least, I know what you told me you did. And I understand. I think." He grinned

again, his smile crooked, but there was a real warmth in his eyes. "What about this other sorcery?"

Jayna waved her hand. "I'm not really a sorcerer, and I know that." He arched a brow at her. "I'm not doing real sorcery, anyway. I'm just using aspects of what I learned in the Academy to help."

"To help?"

"It's complicated. The man I'm working for needs me for . . ."

She trailed off as Bessie returned, offering two mugs of ale, two plates of food, and a shake of her head.

"Bastard at the back table decided to grab my ass. He almost lost his hand." Bessie pulled up her apron, revealing a dagger sheathed at her side. "I'm of half a mind to go back and stab him in the chest, but Pastore would only be angry if I did that."

"I'm sure he would have reason to be angry," Jayna said.

"Yeah? Maybe somebody needs to go back there and grab his wrinkly ass."

"If you need anybody to do it, I'm sure my friend would be happy to give you a hand."

Bessie chuckled. "Maybe I will take you up on that offer later."

She slipped off, swatting at another man reaching for her as she wound through the tavern.

Jayna turned her attention back to Char, who only watched Bessie.

"Would she really stab him?"

"I doubt it, but it does take a special kind of woman to work in a place like this. She is frustrated. I suppose she has every reason to be."

"She's an interesting person," Char said.

"I can let her know you said that. I wouldn't be surprised if she would swing by the outpost. She might even offer to give you some snuggle time. You could use that however you like." She winked at him.

He glared at her. "You wouldn't."

"Well, I would if you wanted me to. I'm not saying she would necessarily agree. I'd be careful with that dagger, if I were you. You might not be the only one doing the poking."

"You're disgusting."

She shook her head, taking a long drink of her ale and settling back. There were times when she agreed with Eva and thought wine tasted better, and there were others when she appreciated the slightly bitter taste of ale. Especially at a place like the Able Angler where the ale was a bit cool, and certainly of better quality than so many other places.

Char watched her. "How did that man end up on your doorstep?"

Jayna shrugged. "Not all of my work is dangerous." Thankfully. If all she did were chase dark magic, she wasn't sure she'd have agreed to it. "I get sent to a city like Nelar, often to wait. Then Eva and I search for information. I usually find others who need help that the Society can't"—or won't, she didn't say to Char—"provide."

"So you just sort of fell into a minor sorcery?"

"Minor. I like that. I've never really known quite what to call it." It was certainly better than admitting she was a Toral. Not everybody even knew what that was, whereas they all knew what sorcery was. "But you're right. I did sort of fall into it. This augments the kind of work I do. Besides, I get to meet interesting people."

He let slide her mention of the kind of work she did. "Like your friend."

"Like Eva. Even the other man, Topher, has an interesting story." More interesting than she had anticipated. She hadn't expected that he would be caught up in any sort of power, but now that she knew . . . "And now he's missing."

"The man you brought to the outpost?"

She nodded. "He wasn't the only one targeted that way, and we went looking to try to figure out what happened when he disappeared in The Hester Square Market."

He shook his head. "I don't know that place. I haven't been in Nelar all that long, Jayna."

"I didn't think you had." Actually, she knew he hadn't. She could feel his presence within her, the connection that bridged them giving her all the understanding of him that she needed. "I was just telling you the location because it might matter."

"Why might it matter?"

She took a deep breath, letting it out. "I don't really know. I'm still working on that part of things." She took another drink of ale. "There's some sort of dark power taking place here. I suspect the men who are missing have a dawning inside of them, which will continue to feed on power, growing, and then the dark sorcerers are going to use it for a festival." They all seemed to be men, though she wasn't sure. Topher and the others he knew had all been male, but what about the three others Eva had heard about? Maybe they were women.

"What kind of festival?"

"A dark festival."

Char breathed out heavily, sitting with his hands cupped around the mug. "Dark power. That's what you are involved in."

She nodded. "I don't know everything they intend, only that I discovered at least some of what they intend to unleash, and—"

"You realize what you're saying," he said.

"What am I saying?"

"You're talking about dark magic, Jayna. Don't you see the irony in that?"

"What irony is that?"

"The irony in *you* saying it, of all people."

"I don't see anything ironic in that," she said.

"No. I'm sure you don't. But I do."

"Why?"

"Because you disappeared, and when you reappeared, all of a sudden you're drawing upon incredible magic." She started to protest, and he waved his hand. "I know you don't want to acknowledge how you got it, but I can tell what you're doing. I saw it. I'm not going to report you."

"Oh, good. I would hate for you to have to turn me in to the Society and share that I have somehow gotten caught up in dark magic," she added with a wry smile.

"Don't do this," he said.

"Don't do what?"

"This. Whatever this is."

"And what is this? You're accusing me of using dark magic, and you don't even know what's going on."

"There's a reason I don't know what's going on," Char said.

"Really?"

"You took off. You didn't even give me a chance to help you. You know I would have. You're my friend. My closest friend."

She let out a long sigh. "I know."

"You know, but it hasn't changed anything for you, has it?"

"What is there to change?"

"I would think there would be the opportunity for you to try to tell me what's been going on. What's really been going on."

"I'm trying to tell you what's really going on," she said softly.

"You could start by telling me about your dark magic."

"That's not what it is," she said.

She studied Char. This was the reaction she'd feared. This was why she hadn't gone to any of the sorcerers in the Society, knowing that if she were to do so, others would react just like Char.

Worse, probably. Most of the other sorcerers in the Society would probably lash out at her, accusing her of dark magic. And while she might have a little bit of darkness to her magic—having used that power and felt the flow of energy on the periphery, she could no longer deny that there was some element of darkness to it—she also didn't believe she was what he feared.

She couldn't argue with him though.

"It's been good seeing you," she said softly.

"That's it?" Char asked.

"What more do you want?"

"I guess I want my friend back. Agnew could help. I know you don't want to believe this, but the Society would even help. There are ways to pull you away from . . . whatever it is that happened to you."

Jayna leaned back, crossing her arms over her chest in irritation. "If you think I'm wrapped up in dark magic, then I don't know how I can prove anything to you."

"What about that?" He nodded toward her hand, toward the dragon stone ring. In the faint lantern light of the tavern, it glowed softly, though most people wouldn't even realize that it was glowing at all.

Heat radiated from the ring, as it often did. She could feel that heat washing outward, rolling through her hand, the power that came from the ring itself flowing through her. In order for her to connect to something more, something greater, all she had to do was tap into that energy.

"It's not dark magic," she said.

"What is it, then?" He leaned forward. He still hadn't touched his food or his ale. "And don't lie to me."

"It just gives me—"

"Power."

"Not dark power," she said.

He grunted. "That's what they want you to think. They draw you in by seducing you with power. And you fell for it."

You, of all people. I wouldn't have expected that of you. Others in our class, maybe, but you?"

She shook her head. "Do you think I'd be seduced by power? I never wanted power. I just wanted..." She struggled to think about what she had wanted. "Understanding. Knowledge."

"Doesn't that lead the same place?"

She twisted the ring on her finger, feeling the power within it. "Not in this case. It's a way to power, but different than we learned about in the Academy."

That was part of the problem with the ring. And perhaps that was his point. Because she didn't know what it was, she had no way of knowing what more she could and should be doing with it. All she knew was that she had found a quick way to access power that she needed.

The tracking spell required three simple elements.

At least, they *should* be simple elements.

She could find the iron nails.

And Char could provide something else, whether or not he was willing to.

As Bessie returned to the table, Jayna made a decision.

"What is it?" Bessie asked, regarding Jayna for a moment.

"Can I borrow your knife?"

Bessie's brow furrowed. "Don't tell me you intend to—"

"I don't intend to do anything to you. Just to him."

Char started to stand, but Jayna hurriedly traced out the pattern Ceran had shown her and looped the snake pattern around him, holding him in the chair. His eyes widened.

It was an easy enough pattern. She understood why Gabranth had defaulted to it.

Bessie shook her head. "Oh, Jayna."

She held her hand out, and Bessie placed the knife into it.

Jayna marched over to Char. "I know you don't want to be involved. I know you don't want *me* to be involved. And I

know there's going to be consequences. And for that, I'm sorry. But I need to do this, or too many people are going to suffer."

"You going to kill me? You gone that far down this path?" Char asked.

She brought the knife up to him, behind his neck.

He held her gaze, almost in defiance. "Go ahead. If that's what you need."

"Thank you." She cut a section of hair from his head, and flipped the knife back over to Bessie, who seemed too startled to say anything. Jayna tucked the hair into her pocket, held the snake spell around Char, and marched out of the tavern, leaving him behind.

JAYNA GLANCED UP AT THE BRIGHT SUNLIGHT SHINING DOWN ON them as they made their way along the street. The air wasn't as humid as it had been, though it still weighed upon her. Her head pounded, and she'd had to use magic to clear it.

How did Eva drink the way she did every day?

Morning had come too early for her. Jayna was exhausted, and she kept waking up through the night, fearing that the Society would come for her, but there had been nothing. After leaving Char the way she had, she half expected that he would've sent them after her. She had protective spells around the home, but she suspected that any full-fledged sorcerer would have little difficulty penetrating them. Eva had done what she could to protect the home as well, but how long would it have taken for a sorcerer to through?

And she had used Char.

She hadn't seen her closest friend for a year. So much had changed for her in that year. But it had changed for him as well. Char was still the studious man she'd met when she had first come to the Academy, and he was filled with the same strong belief of right and wrong. There was

something appealing about that normalcy. It had been a long time since she'd known anything quite like it.

And then she had to go and treat him the way she had.

Jayna glanced over to Eva. Despite how much wine she drank, she looked no differently than she ever did in the mornings. Her pale yellow dress caught the sunlight, almost as if she'd chosen it because of the sunny day. She moved quickly through the streets as she guided Jayna.

She had shared with Eva what she had learned of Asymorn, and Eva had fallen silent. Jayna didn't know if it was fear—which she understood, as Eva struggled with memories she could not recall—or if there was another reason.

Silence had stretched between them, and Jayna wanted nothing more than to break it. “Are you sure this is the direction?”

Eva glanced back at her, wrinkling her face in an irritated frown. “There's only one place in the city I could find fairy fingers. All we have to do is scout. We can go back afterward.”

They were in a section of the city that Jayna didn't know all that well. The buildings were all rundown, with pale gray walls of stone, the same thick layer of moss across them. It was an older part of the city. Most of the stone buildings were small, compact, and those with storefronts had wooden awnings hanging over them that seemed overly large. Some had posts set up in front with signs on them, but most had only a symbol or sigil painted on the door. Jayna studied most of those markings, trying to figure out just where Eva was guiding her, but she hadn't been able to ascertain anything.

“How did you find this place?”

Eva glanced over to her. “You remember Master Nev from the tavern when you were shot.”

Jayna doubted she'd forget. “The two of you?”

Eva shrugged. "He knows things about the city. And you need me to find things in the city. It seems reasonable that I would use him." She fell silent for a few moments before turning back to Jayna. "Why did you put me in the bed?"

Jayna blinked, frowning. "What?"

"Why did you put me in the bed?" Eva repeated.

"Because you passed out. I figured you would sleep better in the bed rather than by the fire."

Eva shook her head. "You would figure that, but you'd be wrong," she said softly.

"What is going on with you?" Jayna said. She looked around the street; there were only a few people out, though they were far enough away that they wouldn't hear the conversation. This wasn't where she wanted to talk to Eva about what had been taking place, but they had to do it somewhere. And they had to do it at some point. "You've been like this for too long. Ever since I met you, in fact, but you've been worse lately."

"I'm so sorry I've been worse for you, the great Jayna Aguelon." There was an edge of hurt in her tone.

"That's not it at all," she said. "I'm just trying to understand what's going on. I want to help."

Eva scowled at her and she started to turn, but Jayna grabbed for her wrist, forcing her back around to face her.

"Don't just walk away."

"I'm taking you where you wanted to go, aren't I?"

"You are, but I still want to know what's going on."

"And I still want to just get this over with. Unless you want to stay in this section of the city? I'm sure there aren't any rapists or murderers wandering the streets."

"I'm not terribly concerned about rapists or murderers," Jayna said.

"You might not be, but I am," Eva said.

"I can protect you."

"Can you?"

There was something to the question that Jayna knew she didn't quite get, something more that Eva was asking about, yet as she studied her, she wasn't sure what she was overlooking.

There was some aspect to Eva that was more than just troubled.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"You wouldn't understand," Eva said.

"Maybe not, but sometimes talking helps. And I'm more than happy to listen. You may think I won't understand, and I might not, but I am your friend."

Eva was silent for a few moments. "I know."

"We are going to find answers."

That was what this was about for Eva, at least as far as Jayna could tell. She wanted to find answers about herself, about what had happened to her, and why she couldn't remember. Jayna believed that eventually they would come up with those answers, but she also wondered how Eva would learn what she needed by staying with her. She didn't want to say that though. She didn't want Eva to leave.

"I've . . . just been through a lot," Eva said. "I try to remember, and when things come through, it feels like everything is there, but then it fades." She said the last part of her sentence slowly, then shook her head. "I try not to think about it, but it's difficult for me. Memories come back to me at times, but I've started to wonder if I will ever recall it all."

It was the most Eva had ever shared with her about what she'd been through, and Jayna wasn't quite sure where to start.

"Does this have to do with the dwarding?"

"No," Eva said. She turned, jerking her hand free from Jayna, and stormed off down the street.

Jayna didn't know what to do or say, and let her march away from her.

She had to figure out what was going on, but she didn't know how to start. Helping others was generally easy. Most of the time, people came to her when they needed something, but Eva had stayed with her partly because she had needed something, and partly for other reasons. It was those other reasons Jayna didn't understand and thought she needed to figure out. If she could, then maybe she could help Eva even more.

Jayna hurried along the street until she caught up to her. Eva swept her gaze along the buildings, looking from door to door.

"Is it one of these?" Jayna asked.

Eva looked over, and there was a hollow darkness in her eyes. "I was told that it's a building without an awning. No post. Just a marking on the door."

"Is there anything about the marking you can tell me about so I can help you find it?"

Eva clenched her jaw, and Jayna wondered what retort she was biting back. "No. I'll know the shop when I see it."

Jayna fell silent.

They made their way down the street, moving a little more slowly. Eva paused at many of the buildings, studying the doors before moving onward. It seemed as if she took a long time before heading to the next, then the next, and each time she paused, she frowned as she regarded the doorway.

Eva traced her finger along a symbol on one of the doors. It looked almost like a large bird, but it was different from any she had seen before. It had a wide head, large eyes, and a narrow beak. "This is it," she said softly.

She pushed open the door, and Jayna looked along the street for a moment, seeing no other movement, before following Eva in.

The first thing she noticed was the strange haze in the air. It was more than the humidity found within the city, more of a smoky sort of haze. It hovered over everything,

but was strongest when she first stepped into the shop, reminding her of the smoke Eva sometimes emitted.

It started to clear as she followed Eva a bit farther forward. As soon as she was inside, she reached for her sorcery and tried to ready a protective spell, but found she could not.

She looked back at the haze, realizing it was some sort of smoky protection that separated her from magic.

This place was dangerous.

When she turned back to Eva to say something, Eva gave her a warning glance.

"May I help you?" an old, creaky voice said from the back of the shop.

Jayna barely had a moment to scan the contents of the shop, noting shelves filled with strange items. Many of them had incredibly detailed carvings, obviously enchantments, and others contained a mixture of powders and leaves and oils, items used in medicinals, healing, but also for other sorcery-related purposes. In the corner, she saw what looked to be the bones of some strange-looking creature, a cat, maybe a wolf, but she followed Eva toward the opposite end of the shop before she had an opportunity to study it too long. The smoky haze trailed after her, clouding around her and making everything difficult for her to fully see.

"You must be Master Raollet," Eva said, speaking slowly. Her voice was soft, and it carried a hint of smoke on it.

The old man leaned forward. He had a high forehead, wispy gray hair, deep wrinkles along his brow, and thick glasses that drooped down to his nose. He rested one gnarled hand on a curved cane, leaning toward her. "I am Master Raollet, but I'm afraid I don't know you."

Eva looked over to Jayna before turning her attention back to Raollet.

This was supposed to be scouting. That was it.

"We are just here for a few specific items of an unusual nature."

Eva hadn't shared their names.

Which meant she was concerned for their safety with this man.

Master Raollet cackled. "Of course you did. You won't find what I have anywhere else in the city."

That was what Eva had heard from other sources. It had to be the reason Nev sent them here.

Eva had her hands limp at her sides, and she noticed one of the strange stone enchantments clutched in either of Raollet's hands.

Eva was worried.

Why hadn't she said anything more?

They could have been prepared for danger, but maybe there wasn't any way to truly be prepared.

They had to get out, come back when Raollet wasn't here.

Jayna wasn't helpless. Her connection to sorcery might be gone, but she still had the dragon stone ring. She started to focus on it, and caught a slight shake of Eva's head.

How had Eva even known she was reaching for magic?

Unless she had only suspected.

"What are you looking for? As you can see, I have many unusual items within my shop. Most people come looking for specific artifacts—relics, as it were—while others come looking for enchantments they can't find elsewhere."

Artifacts. What he meant were enchantments. Jayna was increasingly certain that he had enchantments around him beyond what were visible.

She looked at the cane. It was far too intricately carved to be anything but an enchantment. An incredibly large one, at that. A cane like that would be expensive.

Unless he hadn't paid for it.

He could have made the enchantment, but the skill level for something like that would require someone with

significant magic. Jayna should have detected that kind of power—and she didn't detect anything like that now.

There were other ways of earning enchantments. Sorcerers of all stripes bartered for their services. That was one aspect of being a sorcerer that had been taught to her within the Academy. One simply didn't need to pay for everything. Sorcerers earned money by their magic and the knowledge they acquired at the Academy, but a sorcerer's skills were in high demand, and they could also barter for enchantments or other items.

That had to be what Master Raollet had done.

What was the purpose of the cane though?

She couldn't tell anything just by looking at it, and without having access to her magic, she wouldn't be able to probe at it nearly as well as she needed in order to determine the enchantment upon it.

She might be able to use the dragon stone ring. It had benefits in detecting other kinds of magic, but she had a feeling she shouldn't. There was danger in it.

"We are looking for something most unusual," Eva started then hesitated. Smoke drifted past her, past Master Raollet, and along the back hall.

Jayna needed to be ready.

"You said that," Master Raollet said. A grin came to his face. "A love potion? I'm afraid I don't carry those, though there are some shops in town that purport to use them. There might be some dular who have potential to create that. Dangerous magic, if you ask me." He tapped his cane on the ground, as if to emphasize how dark and dangerous he thought it to be. "I do have some—"

Eva suddenly pushed past him.

Master Raollet tapped his cane again. "What are you doing?"

Eva looked back at Jayna, smoke swirling around her.

It moved past and into a hall behind her.

There was a look that crossed into Eva's eyes, one that Jayna had only seen a few times.

Darkness. Violence.

Most of the time, Eva remained fairly impassive—neutral, even.

There had been a few times she had raged, but Eva never really understood why, as it usually involved a trigger she couldn't remember.

But that violence flashed in her eyes now.

Jayna hurried forward. If the violence were to somehow involve Master Raollet, then she needed to intervene.

"I'm sorry about my friend," Jayna said hurriedly. "We are just looking for something in particular. It is not a very common ingredient, but we have a dular who might be able to use it in a particular enchantment we need."

Eva reached the door at the back of the shop.

Jayna had to work quickly.

"And we heard you might have it."

Master Raollet turned toward her, pushing his glasses up on his nose. He didn't tap the cane this time. That seemed significant to her.

"All we need are fairy fingers."

Master Raollet stiffened. "Just the fingers? Such a terrible thing. Who is this sorcerer who is helping you?"

There was a slight gleam in his eye. Jayna looked at Master Raollet with a different perspective now. The items in the shop took on a very different possibility. What if he were the sorcerer who had created them? What if he were selling *his* items? What if the enchantment in the cane was one he had, in fact, created?

There were dular in the city, though she hadn't learned how powerful they were. They had to have some potential though. Dular could create enchantments that were not as powerful as those made with true sorcery, but the right craftsperson could still generate considerable magic within them.

There an enchantment that separated her from her power when entering his shop. That was a powerful bit of magic. She could use something like that. She might have to ask Master Raollet about it.

"I cannot help with something like that. What kind of person would I be if I were to offer fairy fingers?"

Eva turned to him, and some of the tension left her. Smoke swirled slightly, flowing toward him. "You could offer us the fairy," she said.

"The price would be considerable," he said carefully.

"He doesn't have them," Eva said, looking to Jayna. "We might as well go to Telluminder's shop. I hear he has a better supply."

"Now, that's unnecessary." His tone changed. "I don't think you need to go to Telluminder. I suppose I could part with a few fingers."

He motioned for them to follow, glancing at Eva for a moment as he moved past her and into a back hallway.

"What has gotten into you?"

"There's something here. I can feel it. It's rubbing at me, as if it's burning me," Eva said. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and smoke drifted from her. "I don't understand it."

"Get yourself together. We only came here to scout."

"But now we're buying the fingers."

They headed along the hall, following Master Raollet, and reached a door. There were strips of iron running through it, crisscrossing over it, and he pulled out a key from his keychain and slipped it into the lock.

"Pardon the mess back here. I don't have nearly as many people interested in acquiring items like this. As I'm sure you can understand, I will require payment up front."

"How much?" Eva asked.

"I will part with the fingers for one gold coin each. I don't know what sort of spell you intend, but unfortunately, it might take a few of them."

A gold coin for each finger? The price was exorbitant, but it was also horrifying to her that she was thinking about paying it.

Eva glared at her.

Jayna reached into her pouch, flipping through the coins. She had several gold coins, but it was the vast part of their wealth. Once they spent that, she would have to start back from scratch. It wasn't as if she didn't have any way of earning money. She could resort back to the illegal sorcery, or minor sorcery, as Char had called it. She could earn more back. Or she could even ask Ceran for money, but he seemed like he was above such things.

She pulled out four gold coins and handed them over to Master Raollet.

"Very well."

He unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The smell that drifted out from the other side was foul, a mixture of rot and shit and urine, along with something else that she couldn't quite place. Something equally unpleasant.

"Like I said, pardon the mess."

He reached into his pocket and held up an enchantment that cast the room in a soft, glowing light.

Jayna froze.

Bars of metal ran along the length of the room at the far end. They stretched from floor to ceiling, though given that this was one of the older buildings in the city, the ceiling wasn't very high. They were crisscrossed with other metal, creating a cell.

Behind it were three people.

Not people.

El'aras.

Fairies.

The El'aras could pass as human, but were not. They possessed innate power and used it differently than sorcerers, and had once occupied all of these lands before

leaving them long ago. The three in the cage were of different ages, and all poorly dressed and dirty.

She swallowed.

"Now, it will take a bit of wrangling for me to pull them forward so we can harvest the fingers, so you will have to tolerate a little bit of screaming." He spoke it so matter-of-factly that Jayna could feel her entire being clenching.

"As you know, though the fingers are delicate, they take a little bit more force than you would imagine to separate from their bodies. Their bones are quite hard. Thankfully, I have had access to resources."

Resources. He meant people who knew how to carve up the El'aras.

She looked over to Eva and found her staring straight ahead.

The old proprietor grabbed a strange metal hook from the wall and slipped it between the bars, reaching toward the youngest of the El'aras. He couldn't have been any more than thirteen or fourteen, little more than Jonathan had been in her dream. He had dark hair that reminded her of her brother, though his long face and delicate features looked nothing like him.

The other El'aras had tried to press closer, but they shied away from the hook.

"Get over here." He glanced over to Eva. "The young ones don't cry out as much. You would think the older ones would do better, but surprisingly, it's the young ones that do."

He dragged the El'aras toward the bars, and though the boy struggled, trembling, he didn't cry out at all.

Jayna started shaking her head.

This was supposed to be just scouting.

Now it was about something else.

Jayna had chased dark magic enough to recognize it. That could be the only reason the El'aras were here.

And maybe that was why Gabranth had been in the market.

Dark magic required a sacrifice. Pain.

El'aras had considerable magic of their own.

What better sacrifice than this?

Either she got the fingers—used them to track the sorcerers, then stop the Festival of Mourn and their attempt to release Asymorn—or she stopped this.

Even releasing the El'aras would probably not stop the festival.

She needed to find the sorcerers.

Knowing what she did, and what they had planned, what was the sacrifice of a few El'aras fingers? It wouldn't kill them.

Still, the idea of disfiguring El'aras just because of that magic sickened her. It was dark magic.

And she was not a dark magic user.

“Wait,” she said to Master Raollet.

He pressed the hook down with one foot, and held on to a pair of strange scissors in his other hand, reaching for the boy's hand.

“Wait? Don't you need the fingers?”

“I want to pick a different one.”

Master Raollet started to smile. “I see. You want someone with a little bit of age and experience. I suppose that might matter to a spell.”

She had no idea whether it would, but the idea that she would harvest from one of the El'aras made her nearly throw up.

He released the hook, and the boy scampered back to the others.

“Which one would you like?” Master Raollet asked. “The man has been here for a few weeks. He used to be heartier, but he hasn't really ate since he's been here. The other one, the old woman, was only brought to me last week. Caught her sneaking around in the forest.” He glanced over to

Jayna. "I have a deal with the patrols, you see. They bring me the fairies in exchange for a cut of the profits. Been coming around this area more often lately, which means my business has been good." He grinned before looking back at the female El'aras. "This one is still quite vibrant, if a little ugly." He cackled. "I suppose it doesn't matter that she's ugly. We're only using her fingers."

Jayna studied the woman. She didn't look ugly to her. She reminded her of her mother. She had the same golden hair, though dirty and unkempt from her time in the cell. Her eyes were a pale blue, the color of the sky, and her skin had a soft sheen to it, sweating from the heat and humidity of the room—either that, or the proximity to the strange bars that held them in place. Somehow, those bars had to neutralize the El'aras magic. Otherwise, they would have been able to escape on their own.

She thought they were a family, but wondered if that assumption weren't wrong.

"The woman," she said.

The female El'aras's eyes widened.

Master Raollet shoved the hook into the cell.

"You need to do this to stop the Festival," Eva said, her voice a whisper.

The El'aras woman seemed to hear. Jayna didn't know much about the El'aras, though there were rumors that they had powerful eyesight. Powerful hearing. Power in general.

"Not this way," she said. "There has to be another way to stop Gabranth."

Jayna used that opportunity to hold up her hand. Eva tried grabbing for her, but Jayna was quick. She reached for the power through the dragon stone ring, feeling it building.

The woman looked at her own hand's, looked up to Jayna, and nodded.

She knew.

Jayna angled at the wall behind them and poured power out of herself.

She pulled raw magic through the dragon stone ring and it exploded, shattering the stone behind them.

It wasn't enough.

Jayna called upon more power, and then even more. At the edges of her vision, she had a distant awareness of that darkness, the periphery of power that lingered out there, some sense of energy that called to her, warning her that there could be something more, that she could reach for more.

"Stop!" Master Raollet called out.

Jayna ignored him.

She was no dark sorcerer, regardless of what the spell called for.

Instead, she drew upon her own magic, sorcery buried within her that the Academy had sought to unlock. Adding that to the ring was its own sort of enchantment.

The power slammed into the wall, slammed into the wall, further shattering the stone behind the El'aras.

An opening formed. Sunlight streamed in.

The boy cried out, the first sound he'd made. The woman turned to the boy, shoving him toward the opening, then she grabbed the man, guiding him as well. She locked eyes with Jayna for a moment, then she ducked under the opening in the stone and out into the daylight.

Jayna sank back. She had used incredible power. Too much power.

"What did you do?" Master Raollet asked. He raised a hand as if to strike her. "That will cost another five gold—"

Jayna turned to him, and she pulsed out another burst of power from the dragon stone ring. It slammed into his chest, tossing him into the wall where his head cracked against the stone, and he slumped forward.

She grabbed the cane from his hand, tapping on the ground and feeling a surge of power flowing through it, and

looked over to Eva. "Let's go."

"Do you know what you just did?"

"I do, and I didn't have any choice in the matter. I wasn't going to have him cut fingers off of El'aras." She carried the cane with her as she hurried forward.

"Even if it means stopping Asymorn?"

"I'll stop him another way."

"How?" She looked to the empty cell. "If you don't have any way of tracking the Celebrants, then how are we going to stop him?"

Jayna shook her head. "I don't know. I'll figure it out. But it's not going to be that way."

"Then they've already won."

"If we would have taken their fingers, then he would've already won. We would have resorted to dark magic."

Why would a book on sorcery include fairy fingers?

That felt like dark magic to her.

If she hadn't used Char, she could have asked him, though the idea of going to him with questions about dark magic didn't sit well with her, even if she hadn't agreed to anything truly dark.

She turned, storming down the hall, reaching the entrance to the shop. The haze had cleared a little bit. When they stepped out into the street and started along it, a faint tingling came to her.

Energy of a sort.

Sorcery.

She looked over to Eva. It wasn't her.

Which meant it was somebody else.

Some of it was El'aras magic—the captive El'aras now escaping from the city, their power freed—but there was something else mixed within it, something she had felt before.

She grabbed for Eva, forcing her to come along. "We need to hurry."

JAYNA STAGGERED, NEARLY STUMBLING ALONG THE STREET WHILE holding the cane she'd taken. Weakness threatened to overwhelm her. She had used more magic than she had intended to in order to free the El'aras. It had been worth it though. She couldn't deny that liberating the El'aras had made her feel good, but it was more than that—it was necessary. She wasn't about to allow somebody like Master Raollet to harm them.

She wished she had an opportunity to investigate his shop and try to remove anything else he might have in there that could be harmful to others. If he were a sorcerer, then he had gotten himself involved in dark magic. Ceran would *want* her to remove someone like that—unless all higher-level magic had dark aspects to it.

Of course, if he had only bought the items in the shop, or bartered for them, rather than creating them, then she should have removed some of those enchantments. She didn't have the opportunity though. She needed to chase this magic.

There was power in the distance. She raced ahead and the street opened up.

"You just . . . let them go?" Eva asked.

"What would you have me do?" Jayna asked, turning to her and jabbing the cane at her. It felt a little ridiculous for her to carry the cane, but there was no question it was some sort of enchantment. Maybe she could bring it to Char and see what he could uncover about it, but for now, she could wield it like a weapon. "Were you really willing to take off those El'aras's fingers?"

"You are the one who told me about the purpose of the festival. I assumed you'd want to stop it and prevent this sorcerer from releasing Asymorn, even if that's what it takes."

"What?" Jayna again jabbed at her with the cane. Eva chopped her arm at it, sweeping it off to the side. "I'm not using dark magic to stop dark magic."

In the distance, Jayna could feel the energy of the sorcery. It was strange that she would be so attuned to it so suddenly, which meant it was close enough for her to track.

Find Rendal.

Maybe she wouldn't even need the fairy fingers in order to track him down.

"It's more than that though. You've been quiet ever since I mentioned Asymorn this morning."

Eva turned away from her.

Jayna used the cane, hooking her shoulder and forcing Eva to turn back to her.

"I feel like I've heard stories," Eva said.

Ceran had mentioned stories about Asymorn.

"Then you might've heard of him. It could help."

"Not these stories. I don't know if these would help us at all. If they are true, then he is darkness. He is death." Eva held her gaze a moment before looking along the street. "And we have to keep Gabranth from releasing him."

There was something in the way Eva had said it that left Jayna troubled.

"Do you have some experience with Gabranth?"

Eva clenched her jaw for a moment, and the darkness she had seen inside Raollet's shop returned. "I don't think so."

"But you don't know."

An explosion of magic thundered near them before she had the chance to question Eva more. She had to hurry.

She had no idea whether she could get to Rendal before he stopped using power, but she felt as if she needed to try. She had to get there, to see just what he was doing with his magic.

She started running, glancing back behind her, looking to see if Eva was coming along with her. Eva watched her for a moment before shaking her head and starting forward.

The overwhelming sense of power nearby called to her, but it wasn't just that. It was the way the dragon stone ring constricted around her finger, squeezing as if to remind her that they were facing dark magic. Not that Jayna needed that reminder. Having seen the captured El'aras was all the reminder she needed.

And now they were freed.

She might have made herself an enemy, but it was worth it. How could it not be?

If she were right that Gabranth needed the El'aras for the festival, then freeing them had bought her time before Gabranth could complete the festival, and now she would use it.

As she raced through the city, she focused on the sorcery she detected in the distance.

Detecting sorcery was not a complicated matter. Anyone could learn how to do it, and she had even picked up on it when she was at the Academy. Those who practiced for longer than she did had a greater ability to understand the purpose behind magic, as well as a greater ability to detect others using it and what they were doing with it. There was a certain tingle to the skin when she detected sorcery, a

tightness in the air, and a sizzling of energy that reminded her of a storm rolling in.

The advantage she had in this case was that she had felt Rendal using his power—had recognized his energy—and knew how to track him.

She chased it through the city and reached an intersection. Off to her right, there came another explosion of power. It was along the border of the city, near the forest. This time, it wasn't an explosion of power she felt through sorcery but through the dragon stone ring, a warmth that flowed within it.

"What is it?" Eva asked, stopping next to her.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe it's the El'aras I freed."

"Which you shouldn't have," Eva said.

"What would you have done had I not helped *you*?"

"I would've died," Eva said.

"Did you want to die?"

Eva scowled at her. "What kind of question is that?"

"It's a simple one. Did you want to die?"

"I don't think so," she said slowly.

That was good. There were times when Jayna didn't know. "If you didn't want to die, then you shouldn't want others to die either."

Eva stared off into the distance. "Just because I didn't want to die doesn't mean I don't recognize how one person's death might be of more value than their life."

"And I disagree."

"You can disagree all you want. If it were my fingers you needed for a spell, I would want you to take them, especially if it meant you would be able to stop something worse."

As much as she hated to admit it, there was something to be said about that practicality. If Asymorn was as bad as they feared, and she believed he was, then did she have an obligation to do whatever it took to stop him? Didn't she

need to use whatever power and strength she had access to in order for her to prevent some greater catastrophe?

She turned away from the pressure out in the forest that caused her dragon stone ring to constrict. She darted forward. Distantly, she could feel energy coming toward her like a physical force in the air—sorcery, near enough that she knew she could reach it.

Eva ran alongside her, not exerting nearly as much effort as Jayna.

She detected the pressure coming from around the corner and darted toward it.

She found a crumbling building. It was much like the first place she had battled with Rendal, and finding it now left her thinking maybe he had returned to the same place for some reason. As she stopped in front of the stone, she focused on sorcery, tracing a small, quick spell that allowed her to track whether there was energy nearby. As she did, she pushed a little bit of power through it—not so much as to draw the attention of any other sorcerer, but just enough that she could feel a surge through her.

There was a faint reverberation through her, but then it faded.

Jayna now limped along the street. The wound in her leg throbbed. She should have asked Char to help her with that. She could've had it healed so it wouldn't hurt like this. Now he wouldn't help, even if she asked.

"Where are they?" Jayna snapped.

"Are you sure they're here?" Eva asked.

That was just the problem. She was not sure about anything. Power was here, but the source of that power remained a mystery to her.

She moved through the rubble, then froze.

A shadow was swirling up from the ground.

Not just a shadow.

A dwarning.

One of the sorcerers had released it.

“Eva. We need to—”

Jayna didn't get a chance to tell her what they needed to do. The dwarding started to drift, surging toward Eva.

It took on an amorphous, humanoid-type shape, and there was a terrifying power she could feel emanating from it.

It was calling to her, reverberating within her, an energy that seemed to pulsate with power.

She focused on the snake spell Ceran had taught her, and began to loop it around the dwarding.

She had no idea if it would even work, but as she constricted it, the power of her spell began to hold the dwarding in place.

Eva joined her, and smoke flowed from her.

“I don't know if I can hold this for long,” she said.

The dwarding struggled, writhing, and it shifted its focus from Eva to Jayna.

Once again, she felt the strange call of the dwarding. It was much like Gabranth had claimed. It felt like she was fighting a shadow.

And if it got inside of her . . .

She didn't want to think about what would happen if it managed to settle inside of her and began to devour the magic she possessed. She had her own sorcery, and now she had that which Ceran had unlocked within her.

The combination meant that she would be a feast for this dwarding.

And she would be left as a husk. That was what Gabranth had claimed.

She had to hold on to it.

She squeezed, and knew that she had no choice but to release the dragon stone ring power into the sorcery spell. She could feel the dwarding fighting, twisting within her grasp.

She tried to hold on to it, trying to ignore it, but could not.

It surged, filling her awareness, attempting to settle into her.

"Eva?" Jayna asked expectantly.

"I'm doing what I can," Eva said, her hands dripping with blood.

Smoke swirled around, and it strengthened Jayna, but the dwaring was too powerful.

"Try the other power," Eva said.

"I already did. It's not enough. Not without having something to trap it. If I had an enchantment to push it into, we might be able to hold it, but . . ."

It was too much for her.

The dwaring came toward her. She could feel it, like shadows moving at her, darkness threatening her, and she went cold.

It was a different chill from what she felt while using the painful magic of the dragon stone ring. This was the cold of the dwaring.

She exploded the ring's power out from her, fighting.

The dwaring thrashed inside of her snake spell, fighting against her.

She had to push more power out.

But then the dwaring jerked free.

She could do nothing.

The dwaring slipped away into the sky and disappeared.

She had held it, but now it was gone. She had no idea who it was targeting, but it was loose. It had taken everything she could muster to attempt to hold it, and still she had failed.

JAYNA FLIPPED THROUGH THE STOLEN SPELLBOOK AT THE TABLE, turning page after page, searching for answers. None came to her. Her head throbbed, and she was tired from the time she had spent using magic—but more than that, she was tired from the time she had used the dragon stone ring, drawing upon the dark energy that she increasingly believed was just at the outskirts of her ability to reach. Still, despite her exhaustion, she didn't feel like she could rest.

She needed answers.

She couldn't abandon her search. The Celebrants of Asymorn were going to be acting soon, though she had no idea how soon. People were missing—likely infected with the dwaring. She didn't want to leave them for too long, as she was not sure what would happen to them. She'd tried reaching Ceran, but once again he hadn't responded. It wasn't like him, though she didn't *really* know what *was* like him. He empowered her, gifting her the ring while demanding service from her. The problem for her was how infrequently she actually saw him, though he always managed to find her.

Eva sat in front of the fire. She didn't have a bottle of wine this time, which Jayna considered a win. Instead, she

simply sat there, staring at the flames, watching as if she could learn something from the energy dancing within them.

Jayna focused on her ring. She pushed a bit of power into it again. Doing so caused the ring to constrict on her finger, but then it also caused it to constrict somewhere else. Distantly, she could feel that tightening. She was aware it was out there, that the power flowed, as if by using the ring, she offered some connection to something more.

She waited as she had before.

When the response finally came, another pulsing of the dragon stone ring, she got to her feet, closing the spellbook and slipping it into the cupboard where she kept it.

"I'm going out for a moment," she said to Eva.

Eva didn't turn back, didn't look at her, and didn't say anything.

"You can lock the door behind me," she said.

Again, Eva didn't respond. Jayna worried for her.

Out in the street, she made a point of locking the door behind her. It did little other than offer a false bit of reassurance. If somebody wanted to break into her home, it wouldn't take much to shatter the lock. She had placed some magical enchantments on the lock, along with some warding that would offer layers of protection, but a determined sorcerer would have little difficulty getting through.

She hadn't gone very far before she had the feeling she was being followed.

Her brother had taught her how to navigate the streets, so she wasn't helpless when it came to looking behind her, watching for any possible tail, and she usually did it without thinking much of it.

She'd never seen anything.

Until today.

Two muscular men made little effort of hiding how they followed her.

She slowed for a moment, and she noticed that both of them were carrying clubs marked with symbols. Enchantments—which reminded her far too much of what she had seen at Master Raollet's shop.

He was getting revenge. At least, he wanted to get revenge.

She hurried onward. Knowing she had people tailing her made it easy to evade them.

Or so she thought.

When she turned a corner, thinking she had managed to sneak ahead of them, they were still there.

She darted forward, and they were there again.

She started jogging. The ring vibrated as Ceran continued calling to her. She needed to get to him before he left. He wouldn't wait around indefinitely for her.

When she reached another intersection, the men were still there.

Out of frustration, she used a quick spell, a muted version of the starburst spell, and struck both men with it. It would alert the Society that she was here, but it knocked the men to the ground.

They didn't get up.

She shook her head. She would have to deal with Master Raollet again.

But not now.

The pulsing of the ring persisted.

She followed it. It didn't take much for her to know just where to go. She was thankful Ceran had responded. There was a part of her that had worried he wouldn't, and that he would decide she needed to handle this on her own. She could to a certain extent, but at this point, she wanted his help.

As before, it guided her to the outskirts of the city, to the forest just at the edge. Darkness settled around the city, with the heavy fog of humidity layering over everything, almost oppressively so, making it difficult for her to even

take a simple breath. The ring pulsed steadily, telling her she was in the right place, but it didn't do anything more than that. Just a steady rhythm of power.

As she ran, her mind continued to race through everything she needed to create the tracking spell. Maybe Ceran could help her find fairy fingers. Especially in a place like this that had once been home to the El'aras.

She almost skidded to a stop.

The El'aras.

She had believed they had what she needed.

What if they didn't? It would be just like sorcerers to use a misnomer. They wouldn't necessarily be referring to El'aras fingers, but. . .

Spells required natural items. The spellbook was not a dark spellbook. Which meant it wouldn't include spells that required fingers. It had to be something else. A plant, maybe?

The ring vibrated.

She had to get moving quickly.

What she wouldn't give for some more reliable way to communicate with Ceran so she didn't have to go venturing out into the forest like this, so she didn't have to only hope he would respond. There were times when all she wanted was an answer to a simple question. Of course, he had no obligation to answer any of her questions. He was Sul'toral, and she was Toral, power given to her by him through ancient magics she did not yet know, simply because he had detected potential in her—or so he said.

The fog in front of her started to part as Ceran approached.

Shadows lingered around him, seemingly alive, and as he stepped clear of the fog and the humidity, he came to a stop a few paces in front of her, tipping his head to the side as he regarded her.

"Have you found them yet?"

"Not yet. I still haven't found what I need."

"You said you had a spell you could use to track them."

"It would be easier if you could point them out for me."

"And it would be easier if you hadn't summoned me away. There is danger in my leaving."

Jayna suppressed her own frustration. "Yeah? There is danger in the dwarding, as well."

He chuckled, some of the annoyance fading, but not completely. "You can handle the dwarding. You have handled other dark creatures. They are similar enough."

"And Gabranth?"

"That is another matter."

Sorcerers had incredible power. They could create amazing magic and use it to work with enchantments, turning simple things into much greater things. Sul'toral had power that surpassed that of sorcerers. They had items of power far beyond mere enchantments. They could use those items and perform magic unlike anything any sorcerer could do, manifesting power in the world that could change entire cities—or destroy them.

He smiled as if knowing her thoughts. "Your uncertainty is but a step, Jayna Aguelon. Understanding that you don't have the answers is key to the world you find yourself in. Once we stop Gabranth, we will further your understanding. I think it is increasingly imperative that you know."

"And what world is that?"

"The world of power."

"I've been a part of the world of power for a while now." She had trained at the Academy for the better part of five years—a long time when it came to working with and mastering magic. She had been close to finishing there, at which point she would have moved on to continue her training elsewhere, similar to what Char had done.

"You know the power they have been willing to show you, but you don't know power."

She started to smile, but Ceran had a serious look on his face.

"I thought I needed El'aras fingers—"

Ceran started to laugh, and she glowered at him.

"I realize now that was a mistake."

"There are some uses for such items." He said it with a note of curiosity rather than distaste. Had he actually used El'aras fingers? "But I doubt you would find any spell in this part of the world that would call upon that."

"I think they intended to use the captured El'aras as part of the festival."

"That would have been dangerous. You did well freeing them." He glanced at her, arching a brow. "You did free them, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Good. The last time I witnessed a festival with El'aras involvement, it was a bloody, violent mess. The dark energy released was terrible. It took days to clean up."

"The mess or the magic?"

"Both."

He stepped off to the side, and the fog in shadows seemed to follow him. It reminded her a little of the smoky haze that had been in Master Raollet's shop.

"All for power."

"Many would do much worse for power," Ceran said.

"I know," Jayna said softly.

That had been the reason she had gone to the Academy in the first place. She had chased power, no differently than any other person who went after it. She couldn't deny she had, and she didn't want to deny it either. She had wanted to be a sorcerer because she had wanted to know what that would feel like—what that would *be* like.

And the more she had learned, the more she had come to realize that serving as a sorcerer was not quite what she had believed it to be.

The study was part of it. The magic was another. The knowledge was what she had truly wanted, and while she had learned a significant amount, there was some other aspect of sorcery she hadn't anticipated.

It was the part of her that had become a bit jaded.

It was the part of her that had begun to question whether the kind of power she learned was used in the way she believed it *should* be used.

After learning the truth about how her parents died, what choice did she have but to go after more power—the kind that would help her keep the same fate from happening to someone else? Like her brother.

For everything sorcerers taught and allowed her to learn, there was a delay in how quickly and effectively they permitted somebody who was not a part of the full Society to rise within their ranks. She understood the hesitation to a certain extent. There was a need to protect against those who might use power in more nefarious ways, but it seemed to her that the Society didn't always offer that protection.

It was why she had gone to Ceran.

Finding him had been difficult, but not impossible. The trail had been placed all throughout the Academy, like Ceran had wanted her—or someone—to find him.

Ceran had been watching her, as if he knew what she was thinking.

"Do you believe you came after power or power came after you?"

"I came after power," she answered quickly.

"Perhaps. But you wouldn't have been capable of using it if you did not have potential. Not all can serve."

She had wondered about that. Ceran rarely spoke about the Toral magic, and what it meant for her to serve him the way she did.

"That you didn't seek it out is why you are even less likely to be tempted by that power. It is why I thought you could be helpful. And why I think Gabranth will

underestimate you.” His accented words made it difficult for her to understand him sometimes, but he was clear now.

“Can you stop Asymorn if he is released?”

Ceran's eyes narrowed. “We must stop Gabranth before it gets to that—which means you must find him. And you must find out about the timing of the festival.”

She didn't really know the extent of Ceran's power. She suspected it, and there were times when she thought she understood what exactly it was he could do with that power, but she didn't know with any certainty. That power had given him strength, and had made him something more. It was that power she had borrowed from.

If anyone could handle some dark god, then it had to be Ceran.

“Will you be here if they succeed?” she asked.

“You must ensure they don't.”

Ceran walked her deeper into the forest, stopping in front of a small clearing. He leaned down and clutched a fistful of long, slender reeds before turning back to her.

“Fairy fingers. That is what you needed, I believe?”

She blinked, thinking about what she had been tempted to do.

“Not quite what you thought they were.” She shook her head. “Good luck, Jayna Aguelon. So much depends upon you—more than you can even know.”

JAYNA FOUND THE HOME QUIET. THE FLAMES BURNING IN THE hearth made it far warmer than she preferred, though Eva loved it that way. She paused, looking at her a moment, before her gaze swept down to the game board resting on the ground in front of Eva. They were in the midst of playing a long game, each of them moving a piece every so often, but not with any regularity.

Jayna noticed one of her pieces had moved and she leaned down to lift it.

When Eva looked up, Jayna frowned. "Why'd you put my piece back?"

"I'm not letting you move it there," Eva slurred, spilling a bit of wine on the floor. "It was a stupid move and you didn't even want to play it."

"It was the safest move."

"That's how I know you didn't want to do it. You're letting that man get into your head. If you start playing like Char then I'm done."

"I give up, Eva. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to play the move you intended." Eva's eyes met hers, looking clear and lucid, though she slouched even deeper in the chair and her wineglass hung loosely in her hand.

Jayne knew what move Eva was talking about. Of course she had seen it. Her brother had used it on her a dozen times. But every time she had tried it, he'd shut her down. Jayna glared at Eva, then at the board again. She had talked herself out of it. How had Eva known?

"Fine," Jayna leaned over and plucked the assassin piece from behind her phalanx, and moved it to the center of Eva's guard formation. "There. Are you happy?"

"Quite." Eva's mouth curled up in an impish smile and she swayed to her feet, cradling the wineglass. She nearly knocked the candle over when she placed the glass on the table.

She hiccupped and moved off toward the kitchen.

"Oh, come on. I know you're going to capture it. Just make the move."

"I might. I might not."

This game would never be finished. Jayna sighed and rubbed her shoulder. It was time she figured out if the fairy fingers would work, now that she had them. Eva banged around in the cupboards and came out with another wine bottle. She settled in the chair again and began fumbling with a corkscrew.

"You can go now." She looked up at Jayna, almost impatient to be left alone again. "Unless you'd like to help me get this bottle open."

"Not yet. I've got to work on the spell."

Eva was too busy wrestling the cork out of the bottle to answer. Jayna only shook her head. Eva could drink all night and still be fresh as a field rose the next day. Jayna was the one who needed sleep.

Still, she grabbed the spellbook and her supplies, then spread them out around her, making a mess of the table. The pile of fairy finger reeds rested next to the spellbook, along with Char's hair. She had a bucket of iron nails sitting on the ground, as the blacksmith from whom she had sourced them had only been willing to sell them to her in a

certain quantity. She had little choice but to agree. How could she argue with him that she only needed the one?

The spell ingredients were harder to acquire than they needed to be. Not the nails. Those were easy enough. The hair had involved a sacrifice she wished she hadn't needed to make. But the fairy fingers . . .

Those were hard to get because of her ignorance.

Had she stayed at the Academy and studied, she might have known better. Though had she stayed at the Academy and studied, she would not have gotten into the situation.

And Gabranth would possibly have succeeded.

Now that she had the ingredients for the tracking spell, she was ready to proceed.

Eva remained in one of the stuffed chairs with the fire crackling near her. It was late, late enough that she worried she should wait, get some rest, and then try this again in the morning. Still, even though she was tired, she recognized she couldn't linger too long before completing this task. If she did, Topher would suffer. Already she feared what happened to him.

What was *happening* to him.

And it wasn't only Topher who suffered. There were others.

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" Eva asked, taking a sip of wine.

"Ceran wants me to find the festival as quickly as possible. He's waiting."

"He could have stayed with you."

"Apparently, he has something else he needs to do that is of equal importance."

"Did he say what it was?"

"That isn't really how Ceran operates. But if he says it's important, I have to believe it is."

Eva glanced in her direction, and Jayna focused on the spellbook, the proper mixing of the three ingredients, and

the pattern that was needed to merge them into the contours of the spell.

Not all spell work required ingredients. Most of the time, there were simple patterns that created spells, though at times, it was a matter of using specific words, or phrases, to create the kinds of patterns and power needed to work the magic she attempted to summon. The ones that required ingredients were often far more complicated than those that did not. It wasn't a surprise to her that this one in particular would use a mixture of ingredients. Tracing magic tended to be more complicated, mixing the power of sorcery with the art of the natural world. It was why she hadn't questioned the need for fairy fingers.

She traced out the pattern on the table first. It was a simple series of interlocking triangles surrounded by a looping of power. She had to use a bit of sorcery in order to do that, and hoped there wouldn't be any sorcerers paying attention to the power she used at this time of night, but there was nothing she could do about that right now.

Once she was done, she focused then on adding the first of the ingredients: the lock of a lost love's hair. She sprinkled that across the top of the pattern. It was a strange ingredient, but she thought she could tell why it would be a part of the spell: desire.

Intent had to be a part of all spells. In this case, she had to find something she wanted, and the lock of lost love's hair represented that desire.

She added the iron nail next. She was unsure why she needed that ingredient, but she suspected it was tied to neutralizing any other forms of magic. Iron could often neutralize El'aras magic, as well as the magic of others. It ensured that this was simply sorcery she detected.

As for the last ingredient, the fairy fingers, she remained completely clueless about their purpose. The nail had started to soften, and as it did, it melted across the surface of the tabletop, though it didn't seal down to the table. It

melded with the hair, and when she placed the fairy fingers on top, she watched as they quickly dissolved, wrapped up in a strange surge of power.

Suddenly, the reeds formed the same pattern she had created on the tabletop, mixing in with the energy she had added, and gradually shrinking down ever smaller until they constricted into little more than a coin shape.

A tracking coin.

It wasn't too different from what Topher had given her.

An enchantment, though unlike any other enchantment she'd ever made.

She grunted. "It worked."

"You doubted it would?" Eva slurred.

"I didn't know. For one, I wasn't sure if Char's hair was going to be compelling enough to make the spell work. For another, I didn't know if the fairy fingers Ceran had given me were real."

She held the coin, then looked at the spellbook, trying to figure out what she needed next. It was designed to help find what she wanted, so long as it had magic. With a spell like this, she had to wonder if she could even find Jonathan . . . Her brother didn't have any access to magic, and the spell was designed to search for it.

It felt warm in her hand, and unsurprisingly it throbbed a little bit, reminding her of how the dragon stone ring pulsed, carrying power through it and drawing her along. It was probably a similar kind of magic.

"What now?" Eva asked.

The smart thing to do would probably be to wait, but when had she ever done the smart thing?

"Now we see if this works."

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

She looked over at Eva. She had sat up, and there was a strange clarity in her eyes. It seemed as if the flames danced in them—more brightly than Jayna would have expected.

"I can use this to find Gabranth. Once I find him, we can find the festival, then I call Ceran and be done with it before it gets out of hand."

"Even if we stop it, we're going to have to remove the dwarfing."

She knew that. She wasn't prepared for what that would take quite yet.

"If this works, then we can just check him out. We don't even have to do anything with Rendal yet."

Eva watched her. "I've never known you to refrain when there's opportunity to take action."

She chuckled. "I suppose I *would* do something."

She grabbed Raollet's cane before heading out.

Jayna had no idea what it did—if anything—but it might serve as a weapon in the dark. She could use that much at least.

They stepped outside, closing the door, and she held the tracking coin in one hand. She focused on the sorcery she had detected earlier, and pushed a tracing of the painful Toral connection out through the coin, trying to use it to find that sorcery again.

At first, there was no sense of anything. She began to fear that the power pulsing through it had been nothing more than her imagination. Gradually, though, the coin started surging.

It was a steady pulsation within the palm of her hand. She kept her grip wrapped around it, focusing on the power, and waited for a moment before moving forward. The power within it seemed to guide her.

Eva stayed close, looking over to her from time to time, worry creasing her brow.

How did she seem so lucid suddenly?

"You don't have to follow me quite so closely," Jayna said.

Eva glanced over in the darkness, the pale moonlight reflecting off of her skin, and she frowned. "I want to make sure you're tracking this the right way."

Jayna chuckled. "You're just concerned about me?"

Eva frowned at her again, and Jayna squeezed the coin she had made, feeling the power flowing through it and guiding her. It was an enchantment, but it was a very specific type of enchantment.

In the time since she had left the Academy, Jayna hadn't taken much opportunity to make enchantments. Not that she couldn't—her training had taught her what was involved in making them—but because she feared releasing the necessary power to do so.

Most of the time, Jayna preferred to use the dragon stone ring when she needed power. The ring had the kind of power that couldn't be detected by anyone else, and the kind of magic that wouldn't be tracked by the same people who had tracked her when she had first left the Academy.

The steady pulsing continued to guide her, and she followed the movement along the streets, staying along the periphery, moving through the older, stone buildings on the western edge of the city. The air had far more humidity to it on this side of the city. Her breathing was heavy, and she had to take deep breaths.

"If we have to stay here much longer, I don't know that I could ever get used to this," she muttered, looking into the distance. The fog of haze coming off of that humidity swirled around each of the streetlamps, creating something of a mist around them, blurring them slightly.

"Everybody adapts," Eva said.

"Even to this?"

"What is this but one more challenge? Eventually, you would adapt."

"Is that what you did?" Jayna asked.

Eva said nothing.

The coin pulsed in her hand, and Jayna stayed along the outer road. Most of the buildings were low stone buildings, the kind where she would need to duck her head as she entered, and she moved along the street carefully. It

was times like this when she thought of her brother most of all. Jonathan would have loved sneaking along the streets unseen. He would have loved working with her.

The coin started vibrating more quickly.

Jayna put those thoughts away. She *would* find her brother.

When this was over, when she had succeeded, she would take a moment to see if there were other spells in the spellbook that she could use to help Jonathan. To find him. Only then. Until she finished this, she needed to stay focused. She had no idea what she might encounter up ahead, only that if she wasn't careful, Rendal, or any of the other sorcerers, could attack her. She had to be careful with that.

She opened her fist, glancing into the enchantment. It didn't glow or flicker or do anything else. She just felt a pressure pulsing against her clenched fist, as if it were something alive, twitching inside of her hand.

"We have to be getting close," she said.

"Out here?" Eva asked.

Jayna nodded. She understood her concern though. Out here, there was nothing more than rows of old stone buildings, reminding her of where she had encountered Rendal before, where she had encountered the sense of his magic. Why would he choose this place? She continued squeezing the coin, feeling its quickened pulsing.

Jayna stayed in the shadows, near the edge of the buildings, away from the streetlights. She wouldn't be surprised to find thieves—or worse—in this part of the city. She had to be ready for anything, but if she were to use magic—sorcery or otherwise—she might disrupt the effect of the enchantment, and she might lose her connection to it and no longer have the ability to track what it summoned her toward.

She looked down at the coin, but there was nothing about it that told her anything more than what she felt by

squeezing it. She let the pressure guide her, steering her along the street, and looked over to Eva, finding her with her brow knitted in concern, biting her lower lip. Every so often, she clenched her fists before relaxing them. She was worried, but why?

Jayna detected no other use of magic around her. If Rendal were here, he had hidden his power, at least enough to keep anyone from discovering his presence.

She took a few more steps, moving slowly along the road, then stopped.

She looked behind her.

More of Master Raollet's thugs followed.

This was a different pair of men, and she suspected they would have different enchantments, probably designed to protect them from anything she might do.

She glanced over to Eva. Their enchantments might not protect them from what Eva could do.

"Can you deal with them?"

Eva glanced behind her, frowning. "Why? Who are they?"

"Well, it seems like Raollet has decided to keep tabs on me."

Eva's eyes darkened. Smoke spiraled out from around her, and it spread along the ground, quickly reaching the men, where it swirled up around them, then forced its way down into their throats.

"Not like that," she said quickly.

Eva looked over to her. "You said 'deal with them.'"

"Not like that," Jayna repeated.

Eva's actions would be approaching dark magic, which she wanted to avoid, and which Jayna wanted her to avoid.

The men collapsed, and Eva withdrew the smoke, looking back at the fallen men.

"Better?"

Jayna breathed out. She had to keep an eye on Eva, especially lately. "Better. Now let's keep moving."

The coin had shifted.

It was like a buzzing in her palm, which started as a rapid fluttering and decreased in intensity the moment she passed one of the buildings.

The question now was: Which side of the road did she need to evaluate?

Jayna looked at the buildings on either side. They were identical, at least in the darkness. Both were made of the dark stone blocks, both had the faint glowing moss growing along their sides, and both were low enough that she could practically jump up and reach the top of the building itself. One of them abutted the forest on the other side, whereas the other was closer to the city.

"He's in one of these," Jayna said, waving her hand from side to side.

"You can't tell which one?" Eva asked.

"I need a minute." Jayna shifted her cloak, keeping herself concealed, but making sure that she could keep her dragon stone ring exposed. She had a knife sheathed at her side, but no other weapons other than the cane she'd stolen from Raollet. In the darkness, she wanted at least the knife, and wished she had something more. She wasn't even a fully trained sorcerer, after all, and there were limits to magic; however, there were few limits when it came to those who *pursued* her kind of magic.

She held her hand out, pointing first toward the building near the city itself. The coin still fluttered, but not nearly with the same intensity as it had. As she spun the coin toward the other building, the one facing the forest . . .

"That one," she whispered.

Eva reached into her pocket, and Jayna didn't need to see what she plucked out to know that she grabbed at least one of her enchantments, maybe more. She squeezed her fists again, but no smoke swirled from the ends of her hands. She might have accessed her unique power, but she didn't do anything with it. Yet.

Jayna headed over to the door of the building, sweeping the enchantment from one side to the other. "This is definitely it."

"Now what?" Eva asked.

A stout wooden door blocked her from going any farther, and Jayna looked along the street before turning her attention back to the door, studying it. It was a solid door unlike some of the others along the street, and made of a darkened wood. Not oak, as the grain was too wide, and it was almost as if it were as old as the stone itself. The heavy-looking iron lock on the door would be the real challenge.

Her magic would work against iron, especially her Toral magic, but it would require a larger explosion of force in order for her to push past it.

"Why don't we circle around the building and see if there is another way in?"

"Or we could just go through that," Eva said.

"We could," Jayna agreed. "But let's see if there are other options first."

Eva shrugged. "It's your choice."

The buildings were too close together for her to find a way to the back side, but there was one other thing she could do. She jumped, grabbing the low top of the roof, and pulled herself up. Once on top, she crouched, looking along the street. The buildings were all of a similar level, and she thought she could almost run across the tops of them, which might be necessary if things were to turn. The enchantment still vibrated in her palm, and she pocketed it. Now that she knew where to find him, she had no reason to keep holding on to it.

Eva tried jumping, but she wasn't tall enough to reach the lower lip of the rooftop, and Jayna held down her arm, waiting until Eva jumped again, grabbing her wrist and swinging her up to the roof with her.

"What now?" Eva asked.

“Now we have to see if there’s anything here that will help.”

“On the roof?”

It was made of slate, and damp, much like every other part of the city. While none of the moss grew along the rooftop, that didn’t change how slippery the stone was, and Jayna picked her way carefully along it. This building wasn’t very large, and she made a quick survey, still feeling the vibration of the enchantment in her pocket. She didn’t even need to hold it to be aware of how it guided her. She reached the back side and crouched down, looking out into the darkness of the forest.

Jayna dropped to the ground, but the back side of the building was made of the same stone, though the coating of moss along it was even thicker than it was facing the city.

She jumped, trying to scramble back up to the top of the roof, but slipped. When she landed, her leg came down awkwardly, reminding her of the wound she’d sustained when the volar had shot her. She should have known better. She winced, biting back the pain, and then jumped again, making sure to use her good leg. She reached the lower ledge, got a reasonable grip, and kicked, her foot scraping through the moss as she came to roll onto the rooftop.

“What was that about?” Eva asked as Jayna just lay there, unmoving.

“That was me trying to get back up here.”

“You didn’t have as much difficulty on the other side.”

“Nope.” Jayna got to her feet and crouched down on the street-facing side, sweeping her gaze along it. There was only one way in or out of this building. The vibration from the enchantment told her that this was where she needed to be, and she wanted to find Rendal. If she could get a few questions answered, then . . .

Jayna had to be careful not to get too far ahead of herself. She needed to focus on finding where the Festival

of Mourn would be held, and preventing the Celebrants of Asymorn from freeing him or his power.

One thing at a time.

She jumped down, landing on the street. Eva jumped next to her, managing to make the move look even more graceful than Jayna had.

Jayna turned to the door. "There's only one way in or out."

"We could have saved time by doing this from the beginning."

"I was trying to avoid using magic here."

"Sometimes there is no way to avoid it."

Jayna nodded, knowing she was right. There were times when she couldn't avoid magic, times when she had to simply blast her way forward.

She held out the dragon stone ring, focusing on the lock. Iron would have posed a little bit of difficulty for her sorcery, though her ring and its connection to Ceran would allow her to break through.

Jayna focused on that deep connection within her. It was her link to sorcery, no differently than when she pushed power out through the various patterns or components of a spell. In this case, it was more about focus and channeling that energy through the ring itself.

A burst of energy blasted the lock.

The lock twisted with a shriek before shattering. It sounded loud in the night.

Eva headed forward, pushing on the door. It came open slowly.

"I don't know how much time we'll have before someone knows what we've done," Jayna said.

"I wonder if you should've tested the door before blasting it," Eva said.

Jayna resisted the urge to groan.

"Come on," she said, pushing past Eva.

The inside of the stone building was dark, though there was a single glowing light near the back. She stayed low, holding the dragon stone ring out in front of her, clutching it in her fist as she hunched slowly forward. Now that she had revealed herself to others who might be in the street, she knew she might need to be ready to release another blast of magic. She didn't want to have to do it, but when it came down to protecting people she cared about and defeating the Celebrants, she was willing to do whatever it took.

A strange, pungent aroma drifted into the air, and she looked over to see a little bit of smoke swirling around Eva, who didn't say anything, but simply clenched her jaw as she moved forward, following her.

Jayna hurried forward to the light.

She found Rendal standing in front of someone lying on the ground.

At first, she thought maybe it was one of the El'aras, but she couldn't tell.

She hurriedly traced out the series of patterns for the blade of light, blasting them out from her. The magic struck Rendal, sending him staggering back. He slammed into the wall, where he slumped down.

She hurried over to the figure on the ground. They were unconscious. She checked them over, looking for any injury, but didn't feel anything. She pressed her hands down and called upon the power of the dragon stone ring, hating the pain that burned through her hand as she did. When she was sent that power, it washed outward, fully working its way through the young man.

No dark magic.

She glanced over to Eva. "Get him out of here."

Eva grabbed the person, lifted them easily, and carried them out.

Jayna got to her feet, turning toward Rendal. She held her hand out, ready.

Rendal lifted his head. "You are going to be too late."

"What did you do?"

Rendal had on dark pants and a dark jacket, and his eyes were glazed as he rolled his head upward.

"I suppose I should thank you. I get to feel it."

"You get to feel . . ."

She had interrupted the spell Rendal used. But she hadn't stopped it.

She gritted her teeth. She hurried over to him, pressing her hand down on him, sending another wave of power out from her using the dragon stone ring. Her whole hand was burning with cold now.

She detected something within him, but it was different than it had been with Topher.

She tapped him on his knee, and he rolled his head off to the side, looking up at her. A soft smile peeled across his lips.

"Even you can't stop this."

He coughed and spat, a disgusting bubble of bloody phlegm landing on the stone next to him.

Light came from behind him, leaving strange shadows all around him that seemed to ripple. It pulsed, almost in time with the power of the dragon stone ring. His face looked haggard.

She called on the dragon stone before hesitating.

It might not work.

She needed time. She needed to question him.

She needed to heal him.

Jayna had never learned healing magic as well as Char. He had always been incredibly skilled at it. It was the reason he had come to the city. While in the Academy, she had learned as much from him as she had from her classes on healing.

It was his words that came back to her now, his message about holding on to the focus she found within the individual as she worked on healing. As she probed for any

injury within him, she thought for a moment that there might be a dward, and she continued pushing, but didn't feel anything.

Eva remained focused on the doorway.

"How long can we stay here?" Eva asked.

"I don't know. The tracking spell brought us here. I thought it might lead us to Gabranth, but . . ."

Now she wanted to act quickly before Gabranth appeared.

They needed to take him somewhere else.

"Grab his legs," she said, looking over to Eva.

"Grab his legs?"

Jayna nodded. "Yes. I'll take his upper body. We don't have much time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to get him someplace where we can heal him so that he can tell us where the festival is going to be held."

JAYNA STUMBLED. RENDAL WAS HEAVIER THAN HE LOOKED. HE wasn't a large man, but he was large enough. He'd opened his eyes a few times as they carried him through the streets, mostly to look in her direction, occasionally to cough, but he never said anything else. Jayna appreciated that he didn't continue to taunt her.

Too late.

That was what he had said.

She didn't want to think about what would've happened if she were truly too late in chasing him down. And maybe she was, given how long it had taken them to find Rendal, and how much difficulty she had in finding the spells that she needed.

If so, then Topher and the others were already lost, and Asymorn would be freed. But not yet.

If Asymorn had already been freed, Jayna would've expected to have seen some sign of it. That dark magic would have a signature, and he would have an energy, something she could track, but there had been no indication of that out in the city just yet.

She didn't know what he might do, but anticipated that dark creatures and dark magic would be unleashed upon Nelar.

Jayna dragged Rendal along with Eva, hurrying through the city. They'd gone several streets over before she realized she'd forgotten the cane she'd brought with her. Going back wasn't an option—not right now—but she didn't know what the cane could do.

It probably didn't matter.

"What if he's unwilling to help?" Eva asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Do you think he will help?"

"I don't know," Jayna said again.

Eva laughed. "What do you know?"

"I don't know," Jayna snapped.

Smoke swirled around Eva, and though she had pinned Rendal's legs with her arms, she had her hands clenched into fists. That smoke still swirled, lingering around her, and left Jayna wondering just what the other woman was doing.

She was worried. That much was clear. But what was she worried about?

"You're not telling me something."

"There is nothing to tell," Eva said.

Jayna shook her head, not wanting to stop in the middle of the street, certainly not wanting to stop while holding on to Rendal, but she felt as if she needed to get answers from Eva. "What is it?"

"Not now," Eva said.

"When?"

"Not now."

Jayna sighed and shifted his upper body, trying to redistribute the weight, but already her strength had started to wane. Why did she always get the heavy part? When they had dragged Topher through the city, they had used a cart. Maybe she needed to find a cart to get Rendal to the outpost.

When she slipped, she let out a frustrated cry, eliciting a look of amusement from Eva. They hurried through the city. She grew increasingly tired, and she struggled, but they

crossed over the river. From there, they moved beyond, out toward the outpost. As they got closer and closer to it, she slowed.

She was going to have to get Char to help, but would he?

This involved a very different request than before. This involved helping a sorcerer.

Of course he would help.

Then again, this involved helping a very *specific* kind of sorcerer.

Somebody who was after dark magic. Somebody dangerous.

Char may not even believe her if she told him Rendal was after dark magic. He'd been trained and taught to recognize sorcerers as authority, and in the case of somebody like Rendal, somebody who obviously had considerable power, he would struggle to believe he could be anything but the authority he thought him to be.

She had to try though.

He was growing cold, but he was still alive. Every so often, Jayna would pause and check his circulation, watch his breathing, mostly to ensure that he was, in fact, still alive. Once reassured, she shifted his weight again, hurrying along the street with Eva. How much longer would he live?

"What exactly happened to him?" Eva asked.

"I'm not sure. We interrupted a spell. It involved a dwarding, but I don't know why he would have been performing it." And she wasn't entirely sure why the tracking had brought her only to him. She had thought it would guide them to other Celebrants.

"Did the spell reach him?"

"Possibly?" She glanced down at Rendal. "Probably. I don't know."

That was why she needed Char. *If* he would help. After the way she'd left him before, she wasn't sure she could count on that.

Rendal's torso slipped again, and she grunted, slipping her arms underneath him. Without meaning to, she tapped into some part of the dragon stone to push power out through herself. It gave her strength.

She jerked him up, holding on to him more tightly. Eva gave her a sideways glance, but said nothing. They hurried forward. Once they were on the street outside of the outpost, she lowered him to the ground, raising a hand to tell Eva to wait, and she circled around the back side of the outpost again. It felt like she'd only done this a night ago, even though it had actually been several. How could it be that she would come to Char two times in such a short period after not having needed him for months?

No light glowed in the room this time.

She pulled herself up, borrowing more power from the dragon stone ring, and peered through the window. She wanted to make sure this was Char's room. It would be just her luck if he'd been moved to another room.

She swept her gaze around. A darkened form rested on the bed, its back to her, and the dark hair made it difficult for her to determine whether it was Char.

She tapped on the window.

Now all she could do was wait.

She held herself up, looking through the glass. The figure didn't stir.

Jayna tapped again, but there was still no response.

"Dammit, Char, why don't you wake up?" She tapped yet again, this time with a little bit too much force. The glass started to crack.

She lowered herself down to the ground and looked up at the window of the outpost. How would Char explain that? There might be a spell that could repair the window, but she didn't know any.

A light suddenly glowed in the window and Char's face appeared there. He stared into the darkness before

frowning. Jayna pointed to the front door, circling around the outpost and standing in the doorway.

When the door opened, Char shot her a look filled with annoyance. "What are you doing here? And breaking my window?" he hissed before lowering his voice.

"I'm really sorry about that," Jayna said. "I can repair it, or I can help you with the magic needed to repair it, but I need your help right now."

"Last time I saw you, you held a knife to my head."

"To your hair," she said.

"Still."

"I wasn't going to hurt you. You have to know I would never hurt you, Char. And now I need your help. Can you do that?" Jayna snapped at him.

"Let me guess. Another one of your men who ended up injured?"

"Something like that. Only, this one is a sorcerer."

"A *what?*"

Jayna nodded. "A sorcerer, but—"

"I need to get Master Agnew, then. If a sorcerer is injured, we need to do all we can to—"

"It's a sorcerer who's dabbled in dark magic," she said.

Char tensed.

"I'm not working with him," she said quickly. She knew exactly where his mind was going, and what he likely assumed of her. That he would immediately assume she had gone into dark magic spoke volumes about the nature of their current relationship. "But I need information out of him. And I need your help. Now."

She tried not to sound too irritable, but she was. Char wanted to get Agnew involved, which might be fine, but right now they needed to act before Rendal died and she couldn't get *any* information.

"You need my help to question a dark sorcerer?"

"I need to know what happened to him so I can figure out where they are holding this festival so we can stop it."

"Or you can be there for it?"

"I told you what I was after. I told you the kind of magic I was pursuing. We don't have time. "

"You told me about your brother. You didn't tell me about this."

Jayna was certain she had said something to Char about the dark sorcerers, and the kind of dangerous power they were after, but perhaps all he had heard was dark magic. She had to get him past that.

"I need somebody who has a different kind of healing magic. Will you just help me?"

"Like I helped you the last time?"

"I don't think there is a dward in him this time."

"Are you sure?"

"Not really, but I don't feel one." With Topher, she had felt the dwarding inside of him, and had recognized the way its power coursed, trying to draw on him. This was something different. "Whatever is wrong with him is beyond my ability. I need a true sorcerer."

"Then I should get Master Agnew."

At least Char was coming around a little bit, though not as much as Jayna needed.

"If you go to Master Agnew, it's going to open up the kind of questions I don't need. He's going to prevent me from getting close enough to ask the questions I need to ask. And all it's going to do is delay things."

"Why is there such an urgency here?"

"You can go ahead and get the entire Society involved, but let me get answers from him. We don't have much time, and I'm not even sure that the Society, including Master Agnew, are going to be powerful enough to stop the sorcerer involved."

Char eyed her for a moment, and she could see the disbelief there.

"Just help with this. Start there." She grabbed him, dragging him toward the street. Char was too surprised to

prevent her. When she reached the street—and Rendal—Char hurried forward, crouching down next to him and taking his head in either hand, cupping them on either side of his face.

Power built from Char.

Jayna felt the energy he used, and she touched Rendal on the leg, trying to feel it as it flowed through Rendal, wanting to know just what it was that Char used on him.

She couldn't follow the trail of power, though she knew there was some key to what Char did, some aspect she could follow if she were only able to find it.

"I don't detect any physical ailments," Char said.

"I don't think it's a physical ailment," Jayna replied. "It might be sorcery, but I don't know."

"Sorcery can't be used in that way. It would be dark magic."

She waved her hand at Rendal. "A dark sorcerer, remember?"

Char backed up, shaking his head. "Even knowing there is dark magic out in the world . . ."

Jayna turned to him, holding his gaze. "I know it upsets you. Gods, it upsets me, but I'm going to need your help here."

"I don't know if I can," he started.

"Well, there are seven people missing who are probably being used by the dwarding and will suffer immediate consequences, and that's only during the festival."

"What festival?"

Jayna let out a long sigh, looking over to Eva before turning her attention back to Char. Dark shadows ringed his eyes, and his hair was a little wild from sleep, but he watched her with an intensity that reminded her of when they had been in school. He had always been the studious one, always more attuned with what they were supposed to be doing, taking a no-nonsense approach to their studies. Jayna had been a little more freewheeling. They had been

good for each other. Char had always kept her on track, while she had helped make sure he didn't get so caught up in his studies that he forgot how to live. In the time since she had left the Academy, she had missed that person. She had missed her friend.

"We can talk about it once we get inside, but for now, I'm going to need your help. We need to keep him alive long enough so I can figure out what's going on, get answers from him, and then . . ."

Jayna wasn't entirely sure what would happen then. If there were some sort of spell inside of him that was killing him, then she didn't know if she would even have enough power or knowledge to help. Worse, she didn't even know if she *wanted* to help. Having seen what Rendal and the others were willing to do . . .

Jayna forced those thoughts away. That would come when they figured out what was taking place. Until then, she would keep her focus on the task at hand.

Char glanced over to the outpost. "If I do this, you'll let me get the rest of the outpost involved."

"Fine. After, like I said."

She was getting increasingly irritated, but she needed Char, as much as it pained her to admit that.

"And you will return the spellbook that you stole."

She glanced over to the outpost before turning her attention back to Rendal. He was motionless, and she had a feeling they needed to work quickly or something was going to happen with him. She didn't know what it was, or whether they had enough time for this conversation, but she sensed that if she didn't work through this with Char, he wasn't going to help her.

"When I left the Academy, I had to leave all of my belongings behind. I don't have any spellbooks."

"You shouldn't be using them. You aren't a sorcerer, Jayna."

"I nearly was," she whispered.

He shook his head. "'Nearly' isn't the same thing. You aren't a sorcerer."

"Fine. I'm not a sorcerer, but that doesn't mean I'm not acting on behalf of the kingdom."

"That remains to be seen."

"Just stop. I need your help, or a lot more than your precious Society will be in danger." Jayna didn't know how much time they had, but if they waited too much longer, one of the sorcerers within the outpost would wake up, maybe even Master Agnew, the man Char seemed most concerned by. "Can you do that or not?"

"I will, on one more condition."

"What is that?"

"That you stop running from me. And attacking me when I try to help you."

Jayna glanced over to Eva, then turned her attention back to Char. "I've never run from you." She couldn't deny the other part of what he'd said.

"You don't have to do this alone. You know that, Jayna. When we were at the Academy, it was always the two of us. It could be again."

She smiled at him. "There's the Char I was hoping for."

"You and I have to talk about a few things once we get inside," he said.

"I'm happy to talk to you—when we get inside." And after they did what they could to help Rendal. To get answers.

He grabbed Rendal under the arms, and Jayna and Eva each took a leg, hoisting and carrying him to the outpost's entrance. When they reached the door, Char pressed his hand against it, using a bit of magic to unlock it. Even the door was an enchantment, though Jayna knew that. She had often wondered if her magic would be enough to open the door to the outpost, but doubted it would be. In order to get inside, she needed to be somebody who was *supposed*

to be inside, and considering how she had left the Academy, left magic altogether, she very much should not be there.

It was dark inside, with only a faint light glowing from one of the orbs set into the walls. The darkness gave the outpost an almost eerie sort of feel. She glanced over to Char, and he shook his head, guiding them along the same side hallway they had taken before, but he stopped at a different room. This one was at the end of the outpost, and it was sealed by a strange-looking door. The symbols on the door suggested the room contained great power. There were dozens of them, all of them etched into the wood—or metal, she realized. A mixture of wood and metal would add to the elements of power, complicating whatever magic flowed through the doorway.

“Why this one?” Jayna asked.

“If he does have dark magic”—Char glanced behind him, looking along the length of the hall before turning his attention back to Jayna—“then I need to use the room designed to contain it. This is the only one in the outpost that might have that potential.”

“I didn’t realize there were rooms designed for that.”

“Each room in the outpost is designed for a different purpose,” Char said, as if explaining something she should know. “The one we were in last time was a simple healing room. Had I known we were going to be pulling off something dangerous . . .” He shook his head. “Anyway. The rooms determine the kind of power that can be used inside.”

He pressed his hand up against the door. It didn’t open very quickly. It was different from the other door, as that one opened rapidly under the pressure of magic she had used upon it. This one instead seemed to take on a steady and slow glow.

Jayna paid attention to the pattern he used, noticing how he activated a series of markings on the door. The combination was important as well, she suspected.

When the door opened, Char waved them inside. The room was fully darkened, unlike any other place within the outpost. He stopped in the center of the room, turning toward them and holding up one hand, his knee propping up Rendal underneath him. The room started to glow softly.

When he was done lighting the way, he waved for them to follow him farther into the room.

It was an empty room. Nothing but stone. Four orbs glowed from each corner, providing the room's only illumination. The stone itself was different from the stone in the rest of the outpost—that stone was a gleaming white that contrasted with this room's darkness, as if these stones truly had absorbed dark magic.

Once they were inside, he motioned to Eva to close the door.

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"We have to seal the door closed if we want to hold anything inside of here," he said.

"Like I said, are you sure that's safe?"

"We don't have any choice," he said.

Jayna helped Eva close the door. It gave her an opportunity to examine it a little bit better. Up close, she could tell that the symbols on the outside of the door were old. Some of them looked to be El'aras, though she wasn't entirely certain. Some were similar to the writing within the spellbooks she had studied at the Academy, though even that didn't seem quite right. Then there were symbols that were nothing like the others—flowing letters that looked like they came from other lands, languages not spoken in the kingdom.

Strange that the outpost would have that here.

When she closed the door, she looked at the back side. The inside of the door was much less complicated than the outside. There were markings suggesting that whatever was done on this side of the door would stay here. The door would hold that power, trapping it.

Jayna turned back to him. "Why does the outpost have something like this here?"

"The Society has places that can control dark magic everywhere," Char said, looking down at Rendal. He frowned, holding his hands just above Rendal's body, sweeping them up and down, moving in a practiced fashion. Power flowed from him, and he used that energy to try to track the power within Rendal.

"They have places where you can isolate dark magic," Jayna said, looking back to the door and thinking about the markings on the other side, "but nothing like this."

Char looked up at her, frowning. "Jayna. We are on the edge of the kingdom. We are in an outpost at the outskirts of the known lands. I don't know what you're getting at."

She sighed. *She* didn't even know what she was getting at. All she knew was that there had to be something more to the existence of the door. Some other reason for a room like this than simply to lock in power.

She knew that the city itself was old, older than the kingdom, and older than most who had ever come here. It had once been occupied by a different kingdom, and a different kingdom before that. It had been handed over, time after time, always surviving the transition. Situated as it was near the edge of the forest, at the edge of the kingdom, the city of Nelar had survived. If nothing else, that was its greatest achievement, despite everything else that had gone on in the city.

"There is something else to this," Jayna said, glancing over to Eva.

She had seen much in the time that she'd worked with Ceran, but nothing like this. She'd need to ask him about it when she had a chance. It was possible *this* was the reason Ceran had wanted her to come, that he had intended for her to find something like the power this room could contain.

Eva stared at the markings in the back of the door, a deep frown working up into her eyes. "They have known darkness in this land," she said.

"That's my fear," Jayna said.

As she looked over to Rendal, she noticed a faint trail of darkness starting to glow from his skin. It was almost as if shadows coalesced along the surface of his body before pressing outward, a purplish-hued energy that radiated from him.

The dark energy was already manifesting.

Whatever power had been used on him was starting to take hold.

Dark power.

And given what she'd seen from the dwaring, Jayna worried it would be released—and do something similar to what the dwaring had done.

Which meant they had to stop it.

Would the room be enough?

That power pulsed again.

A sudden constriction in her ring warned her that she had to act now.

Only . . . she didn't know what they would have to do—or what kind of power had been used on the dark sorcerer to make him like this.

Rendal started to convulse, then he began to moan. The voice that came from him, however, was not his.

SHE HAD SEEN THE GLOWING DARKNESS ENOUGH TIMES TO KNOW exactly what it was. There were others of power who had used a similar technique, and she had, at times, been tasked with stopping them. Creatures of darkness were one thing, and volar with their dark enchantments another, but she'd never faced a dark sorcerer herself.

Still, she knew exactly what she needed to do, though she feared Char wouldn't let her. Maybe she had to ignore what Char might want her to do. She just had to do it.

She hurried forward, crouching down next to Char, looking over at Rendal. Other than convulsing, he hadn't moved since they'd brought him into the room. She checked the circulation in his neck, noting that he was breathing, and ignored Char's pointed glances in her direction. She used just a hint of the painful power coming through the dragon stone ring, the Toral magic guiding her, and she let it flow out from her, sweeping in a circle.

The pattern was specific to what she intended. She wanted to trap anything that might be contained within him. If she could do that, then . . .

"What are you doing?" Char asked. "How did you learn to do that?"

"I'm doing what I have to do. And I have my own ways of finding things out," she muttered, continuing to sweep her hand in a steady pattern as she held on to the magic.

She probably should've done it before, but she hadn't expected Rendal would have so much darkness within him. Then again, she didn't know if it was Rendal or the room itself.

"I can see it's not a simple sorcery spell." Char kept his hands situated above Rendal, and his own spell flowed down, as if he were trying to heal him. As Jayna looped her power around, trying to trap and confine the dark magic within Rendal, she felt Char beginning to withdraw.

"Not yet," she said.

"Not yet? What do you mean?"

She looked up, holding his gaze for a moment. "I need you to keep trying to heal him."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to hold the darkness within him so it doesn't get out and infect us." She hadn't expected to need something like that here.

"How is it that you know how to do that?"

She flicked her gaze to Eva before turning back to Char. "That's what I've been doing in the time I've been away. That's what I've *really* been doing."

"You've been using unregulated sorcery."

She shook her head. "Not exactly. I made my agreement to get the power I needed in order to find Jonathan, but there was a price."

"The price of dark magic."

"The price of *finding* dark magic," she said. She sent a swirl of power around and squeezed it inward, trapping the power in Rendal. His dark magic wasn't fighting her efforts to contain it, not the way so many other dark magics worked, but she could feel it pushing outward in a way that suggested that if it were to escape from Rendal, they would

have a very different battle on their hands. "I need you to use a healing on him while I trap this inside."

"If he's sick from the dark magic, then it seems like removing it would be easiest," he told her.

Jayna shook her head. "Unfortunately, with the kind of power that's within him, there will be no removal in this life."

Char started to laugh. "That means he's going to die."

"Yes," Jayna said. "Is that so bad?"

"We're taught at the Academy to preserve and protect life."

She thought of his comment when she'd first brought the sorcerer to him. He hadn't been as concerned then, but she suspected it was more about Char's irritation that she'd brought him someone else to heal than his real feelings.

"That's what you're taught at the Academy," she agreed. "But that's not the way the world works. That's not the way this kind of magic works."

"And you know so well how this magic works?"

She looked over, smiling tightly. "I need you to try to heal him," she said again.

"Jayna, I'm not going to get caught up in using dark magic."

"*You're* not using dark magic. *He* did."

"And you are."

She started to shake her head, but cut herself off. "I'm going to trap it, and you need to heal him. Once he starts coming around, then you need to back away."

"What are you going to do to him?"

"I'm going to question him," Jayna said.

Char looked over to her, saying nothing. He kept his hands in place over Rendal's chest, and the power flowing out from him didn't shift, but he didn't do anything more with the magic, certainly nothing that would imply he was trying to help heal him.

"You know me, Char. You know what's in my heart. When have you ever believed I would use dark magic?"

Char watched her for another moment, then he turned his focus down to Rendal, and his power began to build again. It started slowly, building with a rapid intensity, washing out from him. It was a rippling, almost wavy sort of power. It was far more controlled than what she had seen him using with Topher, and far more impressive than what she had ever seen from Char before. He had learned quite a bit in the time since the two of them had been at the Academy. When she had been here before, having him help her with Topher, she had known he had learned more. Yet seeing it in action now, seeing the extent of his power and knowledge was . . .

Exciting.

She couldn't deny he was an attractive man, but the power and control he held over his magic was even more attractive.

Behind her, she could hear Eva's soft laugh, just loud enough that Jayna suspected Eva knew how Jayna's thoughts had turned.

"I don't know if this is even going to work," Char said.

"It has to work," Jayna replied.

"And if it doesn't?"

"If it doesn't, then . . ."

If it didn't, then she was going to have to find a different way, but right now, she didn't know how else to find the Festival of Mourn or the Celebrants of Asymorn. All she knew was that she didn't have much time remaining.

She used the dragon stone ring, letting the painful energy swirl around, her hand continuing to constrict the darkness back into Rendal. It flowed into him, held there. She knew that if she hadn't held on to that power tightly, she would lose control over it, which would likely cause some aspect of it to shift, and when it struck . . .

Suddenly, Rendal took a deep, gasping breath.

"Back away," she said to Char.

She stayed near Rendal. His eyes were open, though the irises were completely black. In fact, both eyes were entirely black. The energy pushing outward against the power she held to contain it threatened to seep out. Had she not looped so much energy around him, using the containment spell, she might not have been able to hold it. Strangely, there was something within the room that seemed to augment that containment spell, almost as if the room itself were designed to facilitate the kind of magic she used. Jayna would have to think about that later.

"I need to know when your festival is going to happen."

Rendal turned his head, looking at her. "You are too late," he said, his voice strange and twisted. There was a dark energy within it, and Jayna could practically feel the darkness constricting his vocal cords, altering the contours of his voice.

She shivered, holding even more tightly to the power around her.

Smoke swirled in the room, and she glanced over briefly to see Eva standing off to the side, her fists clenched, droplets of blood dripping to the ground. The smoke streaked upward and formed a soft pattern. Jayna suspected that she was the only one to see it, and she might even be the only one to feel it, other than Eva.

She turned her attention back to him. "Asymorn, I presume. Rendal decided to summon your power himself."

He wanted power. Of course he wouldn't have been willing to wait.

Either that, or she was too late and Asymorn had already gotten too strong.

"You are too late," he repeated.

"The dwarding haven't been released, so I know that I'm not. When is the festival?"

Rendal started to laugh. He thrashed, his body writhing on the ground, but the containment spell that Jayna had

formed held him in place, preventing him from moving beyond her hold.

"I compel you to tell me the timing of the festival."

She ignored Char's soft gasp.

That kind of magic was forbidden by the Academy, but it was that kind of magic that she needed now. Jayna understood the reasoning behind some of what the Academy had taught, but there were times when she had seen the need to go against the Academy's teachings.

Using sorcery to compel someone to follow instructions was considered dark magic. Using it to compel a dark sorcerer? That seemed like good magic to her.

She twisted the spell, adding a layer that flowed into his mind, swirling downward. She used sorcery for that, ignoring the painful magic of the dragon stone ring. It was only through the combination of the two that she could compel Rendal to share the information she needed.

"Jayna?" Char started.

"Leave her," Eva snapped.

Jayna continued to push power out, focusing it on Rendal. "Where is the festival?"

Rendal started to laugh even more. "You are never going to stop it in time. You could not."

Jayna took a deep breath, and she let another layer of power swirl around, holding the dragon stone ring above his belly.

She could hold him now. The spell was complete, intact, and even though she didn't understand it, she recognized that the walls of the room were designed to help her contain any more magic. As she continued squeezing, she could feel how the spell held that darkness inside.

Now she had only to shift the containment spell again to compel him.

It took another layer of power.

It was drawing upon significant sorcery. Anyone who recognized sorcery—and inside of the outpost, that would

be pretty much everyone—would recognize the kind of power she used.

This was *definitely* forbidden magic.

This would draw the Society to her.

Doing it in front of Char, someone who was so tightly bound to, and affiliated with, the Society, was even more dangerous. It meant she would either have to explain herself, or she would have to find some way to compel *him*, to keep him from sharing what she had done.

Jayna pushed that thought away, as well.

Focus on Rendal.

That was the reason she was here. Not to hurt Char. Char had helped.

She pressed that power down into Rendal. “Where is the festival?”

“You won’t be in time. Once the dwarding mature and emerge, he will take their power and come through.”

At least she knew what his plan was. Even if she had no way of stopping it, no way of undermining the festival, she finally thought she understood what he intended: to bring the dwarding together.

But “*he* will take their power”?

Was Asymorn talking about himself . . . or someone else?

She glanced over to Eva. “When the dwarding mature, what happens to their hosts?”

“They will kill the host,” Eva said.

Which meant Topher and the others would all die. More people would succumb to dark magic. She clenched her jaw, turning her attention back to him.

“Tell me where the festival will be.”

This time, she didn’t hold anything back. She poured everything she could into him, forcing it deep inside of him, even more power flowing out of her, slamming into Rendal. It was all of the energy of sorcery she could draw.

As soon as she did it, she realized her mistake.

She'd been using so much of her focus to compel him that she'd lost her hold.

Rendal started to rise.

The power he held attempted to squeeze out, and Jayna was forced to shift her focus, pulling on the energy of the dragon stone ring. She held it above his chest and started to twist her hand slowly, creating more of a containment spell. Even as she worked, she could feel the containment starting to fail.

"Get out of here," she shouted to the other two.

"Jayna?" Char asked.

"Get him out of here," she said to Eva.

Eva didn't hesitate. She grabbed Char, pushed open the door, pushed him out of the room, and followed after him.

That left her alone with Rendal.

She didn't want to be alone with him, but she recognized that if she lost control over the spell, she wanted to be the only one who would succumb to that dark magic. She didn't want anything to happen to Char.

"Do you think you can hold me forever, Toral?"

"I don't have to hold you forever," Jayna snarled, squeezing even more power out.

There was something in the dragon stone ring that reverberated off of the walls. She had to use that.

Rendal thrashed, suddenly violent.

She staggered back. She no longer needed to try to heal him and wake him. At this point, what she needed was to keep him held in place until she had her answer. She pushed out sorcery, using that in order to try to compel him to share what she needed, but even as she did, she knew he had more power than her.

He had already tapped into the dark energy of Asymorn.

Which meant she had to tap into something greater.

The dragon stone ring connected her to Ceran, but because of the pain she felt each time she tapped into it, she had only been willing to use it superficially. Ceran had

suggested that, over time, she would find herself drawing upon it more, but given her fear about how the pain tied her to something darker, she had hesitated. She'd glimpsed that power once, but had not fully reached it. Now seemed like a pretty good time to have some mastery of it.

She swirled her hand again, creating another looping of power to confine him. It barely held.

Asymorn started laughing. "You make this too easy, Toral."

"And you will never escape this room."

"Oh, I know. But neither will you."

With that, he thrashed again, the dark energy pulsing, pressing outward, threatening to explode and overwhelm her.

Ever since getting tied to Ceran, she had been bound to his quest, searching for surges of darkness. She had willingly accepted it, but she had also known the risk and the danger. Eventually, three things might happen: She could succumb to the dark magic herself, and end up chased by others like her; she could be destroyed by a dark magic user; or, less likely, she would grow in skill and power until she moved on to something Ceran hadn't fully explained.

She wasn't ready to fail. Not yet.

Jayna focused. She had felt the fluttering of power at the edge of the connection to the dragon stone ring before. She now had to reach it. Pain began to work through her, starting in her fingers, working up her wrist, and as she continued to reach for the energy within the dragon stone ring, it began to go up her arm. This was the point where she normally released it.

She couldn't. Not yet.

It was there. A vast emptiness. What did it matter if there was a twinge of darkness to it? Wasn't the darkness a part of all things anyway?

Jayna focused on the ring, felt the reverberation of energy off the wall, the power that pressed inward against her, and she squeezed.

There came a flood of energy.

It was more than she had ever reached from the ring before.

Even more than what she'd glimpsed.

She called upon that power. It worked into her chest. Ceran had suggested that she had some potential, and she tried not to think about what that meant for her.

All she cared about was how she pushed that power into Rendal.

He stopped thrashing. He stared up at her, dark eyes blackened.

"You will never stop it," Asymorn said.

"Where is the festival?"

He started laughing, but it was softer, wispier than before.

"Where?"

She blasted him again, more power surging from her hand into his mind.

"Rendal, if you are in there, I need to know where the festival will take place."

There was a moment when she feared he'd died, and any chance to have answers died with him. Then he took a gasping breath.

"On the next new moon. In the depths of night. He must feed."

With that, Rendal sagged back. His breathing stopped. She checked his neck, but he was gone.

She pressed her power down, forcing the dark energy to stay within his dying body until he was fully gone. Once he was, the darkness would go back to where it came from. She crouched there, waiting for a long time, hating that letting a man die was now a part of her task, but she could feel his energy pushing against her. She could feel the way

it flowed, and she could feel it disappearing gradually until it was completely gone.

At least she had an answer, sort of.

The next new moon. Midnight.

But where would Asymorn be able to feed?

DAYLIGHT CAME FAR TOO EARLY FOR JAYNA. EVERYTHING WITHIN her ached; she'd used far more magic than what she had needed to use since coming to Nelar. There was no pulsing in the ring, though she'd attempted to summon Ceran earlier.

He had fallen silent.

Ever since trying to contain the power within of Rendal, she had attempted to call to Ceran. At this point, she was well beyond her comfort level. He would have to come to the city and help her find the festival.

Only he hadn't answered.

Every time she tried, it felt as if something was pushing against her.

Not when she had used power on Rendal, but when she attempted to send that power beyond, toward Ceran, there was a resistance she didn't usually feel.

It meant she would have to do this alone.

She looked at the ring, realizing there simply wasn't enough power in it to deal with seven dwarding and Asymorn, should he be freed—not unless she fully gave into it.

She paced around the inside of her home, glancing over to Eva situated in front of the hearth, holding on to a glass

of untouched wine. Her dark hair was swept back over her shoulders, and her back was bowed, her gaze lost as she looked into the flames, almost longingly.

"I'm not even sure where to start," Jayna said.

She had found a stone sitting on the table when she returned home—small, perfectly smooth, and pale white with a single marking. She twisted it in her hand.

She wasn't sure what the object was, but when she attempted to push her sorcery through the pattern, she had a dull sense of a reflected power within it.

An enchantment, but one unlike any she'd ever seen before.

It had been left with a note written in a beautiful scrawling script. El'aras.

They had gifted her something, but what?

"You convinced your friend to stay out of it," Eva said.

She shook her head. "You saw his reaction. He wouldn't have been able to do anything."

As they'd dragged Rendal from the outpost, Char had looked devastated. Jayna had tried to explain what they'd needed to do, who Rendal was, but Char hadn't wanted to talk about it. Jayna had revealed dark magic, and he was scared.

She had told him about the new moon, but then he'd left her, turning away and closing the outpost. Closing himself.

She could *feel* him though. The connection they shared linked them even now.

Eva shrugged. "He's a sorcerer."

"Not fully trained."

"There are others in the outpost."

"Who will burn off my magic if they discover me," Jayna said.

"Then we are on our own," Eva said. Jayna nodded. "Which means we start with the new moon."

The new moon. It meant they had less than a day to not only figure out what the Celebrants intended, but also some

way to stop them.

"If they are as powerful as it seems, and if they have access to as much magic as it seems, I'm not sure we are going to be able to prevent them from releasing that power," Jayna said.

"Char—" Eva started.

"He won't want to reveal anything to the Society."

At least, that was Jayna's belief. She needed Char to keep things from the Society, but she felt as if they might need the Society's help to prevent the Celebrants and their festival from succeeding. If they didn't, she feared they would face a very different danger.

"Then what would you have us do?" Eva asked.

"I don't know."

"We have little time. Hours rather than days," Eva said, swirling her wine but not taking a drink.

"Hours and not days, and he said Asymorn would need to feed when released."

She would have to contain the dwarding to stop the festival, but Jayna had no idea if they had enough power, magic, and concentration in order to do so. If they were fully fed, and if they emerged from their hosts with incredible power, they could turn upon the world and attack—something she found far too easy to believe. Still, she wasn't sure what it would take to contain them.

Already it was going to strain her ability.

Removing even a single one of the dwarding had been incredibly difficult. Almost too difficult. She had captured it inside of the enchantment, along with Eva's help, but now they were dealing with the possibility of needing to confine seven of them—seven that were fully formed and incredibly powerful. And there was still the possibility that one of the dwarding roamed free. It had escaped when they had attempted to contain it. There had been no sign of it, which worried her.

"I will keep looking for where this might take place," Eva said.

"You don't have to look. We can both look."

Eva got to her feet, swirling the wine bringing it to her nose and sniffing. She took a long drink before setting it down on the table next to the stuffed chair. "I will look."

Jayna didn't know whether she could trust Eva to search, at least not in her current state. She'd been drinking ever since they had returned from Char and the outpost. She worried that Eva was not in the right frame of mind to participate in stopping the festival.

But even though she was worried, she still had to complete her own preparations.

Eva glanced to the wineglass, looking at it longingly before heading outside and closing the door behind her. The day was bright and warm, yet Jayna didn't feel any of that warmth. She didn't feel any of that comfort. She didn't feel anything other than a sense of rising dread within her at what was to come.

She looked back down to the spellbook. There had to be something in it that would help, but so far, she had not found anything. Thankfully, she had found the tracking spell—for all that had done for her. It had helped her find some answers, though not all of them.

And now she needed to use the spellbook to reach more of an understanding. She needed to find some way to perform the correct enchantment so she could be ready to hold the dwarding.

She tried summoning Ceran again, but if it hadn't worked the last time, she doubted it would happen now. Either he couldn't come or he didn't detect the summons.

There were several different enchantment options within the spellbook. This was a fairly advanced spellbook, and when she had first gone to the Academy, everything within the book would've been beyond her, but not only had she learned to master quite a bit in the time she had been

there, she had also learned quite a bit studying her magic and through the power permitted to her through the dragon stone ring.

Finally, she came across a section that looked to be only enchantments.

The spellbook wasn't arranged in any sort of sensible fashion. It was different from the spellbooks she used in her earliest days at the Academy, as well. Those spellbooks were all coordinated based on topics of interest, along with what sort of progression a sorcerer needed in order for them to gain the necessary skill to use the spells.

This one was an advanced spellbook. Unfortunately, she didn't know how to navigate through one of those.

She flipped through the pages, looking at one enchantment after another.

There were quite a few Jayna knew how to make naturally. Enchantments for items she could sell were the easiest. A hint of strength. A hint of speed. Better eyesight. Hearing. Ways of alerting the enchanted. All of those had value. They were expensive—not only for the person who bought the enchantment, but for her to make. In order to find the necessary ingredients for many of them, she had to have access to resources that weren't always the easiest to obtain, now that she was separated from the Academy.

This one.

She paused, skimming the page.

It looked as if it would work.

Maybe not nearly as well as the enchantment Char had made—something that Jayna was increasingly certain was far more impressive than what she had realized at the time—but it *should* work. It was a simple containment, but the nature of the enchantment, and the power that would be involved, was far more complex than many of the other containment spells or enchantments that she found elsewhere within the book, and different even from other

enchancements she knew about. It was why she had hesitated.

The containment required quite a bit of magic and the right ingredients.

She had to be careful as well. She needed the Sorcerers' Society to help, but she didn't need them slowing her down. At this point, she suspected Char had shared what was going on, and though she didn't want to deal with that, she couldn't deny there might be some benefit in having their involvement.

Jayna knew better than to attempt the enchantment too late in the day. She needed to do it now, recover, and be ready to call upon power later in the day, near the new moon, when the festival would take place.

Thankfully, most of the ingredients for the enchantments were items they had around the home. It involved silver, a hint of wood, and a bit of salt, of all things. The ingredients in creating the enchantment were the easy part. The harder part was the actual magic involved.

She gathered the silver first. She had quite a bit within the home. Many of her jobs were paid in silvers, which were certainly valuable enough, though she would much rather have a pocket full of gold coins. Using silver as an ingredient would certainly make these enchantments more valuable, but silver itself tended to counteract magic, especially when surrounded by a significant amount of power.

It was the same with the salt. It would hold when combined with the silver and bound by wood. Hopefully all of it would hold. She arranged the items on the table, sweeping her hands around as she prepared for the actual spellcraft involved.

That was the complicated part of magic.

She should have asked Char for help with that kind of magic as well. Maybe if she would've asked him to assist her in creating the enchantments, she could have easily

facilitated this without risking the Sorcerers' Society noticing.

Now she had no choice but to get to work.

She separated her ingredients into seven different stacks, readying each of them for the enchantments. When she had done that, she cleared a section of the table and layered out the pattern, tracing it with her finger, mostly for practice. When she felt comfortable with the pattern, she reached for the salt, using that to form the pattern and solidify the enchantment. She then placed the silver at the center of it and added the wood. As she did, she could feel the enchantment starting to sink in and solidify.

Jayna had only to push out with a burst of sorcery.

It was a matter of sealing it in the enchantments, letting it take hold.

The energy fluttered for a moment before solidifying. It took hold within the enchantment, and gradually, the silver around the salt bound together, coalescing around the wood. She then felt a tension in the air.

She recognized that tension. It came from the Sorcerers' Society—their way of trying to track unregulated sorcery. She had to be careful.

The enchantment wasn't nearly as large as the one Char had created, but she had to think it would work. She had used the spell in such a way so as to ensure she could draw power out from the enchantment and contain the dawning when she pushed them into it. She could seal it inside with her ring, and she could use even a bit more sorcery, if necessary, to confine it.

Now she had to make others.

She had six more to create—not difficult for her to do, now that she had proven she could create one, but she needed to conserve energy.

She worked through them. By the time she finished the seven enchantments, she was tired. She looked to the entrance to the home, noting that the sunlight had started

to shift its position. It was getting later; soon they would be nearing nighttime, and getting closer to the new moon.

Jayna leaned back in the chair. She was tired—not physically, but from using so much magic. She hadn’t used sorcery like that in quite some time, so expending all of that energy had been more of a challenge than she had expected. If only she had asked Char to create the enchantments for her, but after what had happened with Rendal, he had wanted them out of the outpost. She wouldn’t have needed to struggle quite as much, and she could’ve preserved her strength for battling the Celebrants of Asymorn and dealing with the Festival of Mourn.

She had hoped he would help, even after she’d left him at the Academy. She had thought he wouldn’t hold a grudge, but even he had abandoned her now. She tried to suppress the hurt.

The door opened and Eva entered. She glanced from Jayna to the table covered with the enchantments, her pale face wrinkled with a frown. “Did you do it?”

“I think so. These should work. They were difficult enchantments to make, but I think they’ll hold.”

Eva headed into the kitchen, pulling open one of the cabinets.

“You don’t need any wine.”

Eva looked over her shoulder. “Who said anything about getting any wine?”

“I just . . .” Jayna shook her head. “Did you find anything?”

“I’ve been looking for a place where the dwarding could feed when they emerge. That’s going to be the key to whatever they do. The moment they emerge, they’re going to need more power.”

“Even though they would have fed on their hosts?”

“Feeding on the host is only a part of their need. In order for them to draw the necessary power, they’re going to need to *keep* feeding.”

“‘The necessary power.’ By that, you mean the power Asymorn will need.”

Eva pulled open another cabinet, pulling out a bottle of wine and setting it on the table in front of Jayna, dropping into a chair across from her. She looked at the bottle of wine, but didn’t open it. “Everything I’ve been able to determine about this prison—and from what I can tell, it *is* a prison—suggests he has been confined for an impossibly long time.”

“And if he were freed?”

“If he were freed, then it is not difficult to believe that he would find some way to use the power of the dwarding, and the power he has channeled through them, to fuel something more.”

Jayna studied Eva for a long moment. “Why do I get the sense that you know more than you’re letting on?”

“I told you about the stories I remembered.”

Jayna nodded. “You did.”

“Stories like that are meant to scare, but they’re also meant to inform.” Eva leaned forward, watching the bottle of wine, looking as if she wanted to grab it, lift it, and take a long drink. “I had another memory of those stories.”

“You did.”

Eva shook her head. “It was after we were in the outpost. After Rendal came out.”

“And?”

Eva looked at the bottle of wine. “There were twelve like him. Beings of power. Dark power. The stories claimed they lived in our lands a long time, destroying much, before they were contained.”

“You said it was just a story.”

“Just a story,” Eva said, nodding. “Just a story, but a dangerous one.”

Jayna grabbed the enchantments off the table, gathering them together, and then stuffed them into her pocket. When they were facing the Celebrants, they would have to

be careful, and they would have to be ready. She didn't want to forget the enchantments. Jayna didn't know if she would have enough strength to make another enchantment, nor did she know if she would have the time to do so while facing the possibility of an attack.

"You said there were others like Asymorn?"

Eva nodded. She looked up and grabbed for the bottle of wine, holding on to it.

Jayna grabbed for it as well, and squeezed her hands on the bottle, wanting to prevent Eva from taking a drink.

"If there were a dozen like him, and if there are other Celebrants, what would happen if those Celebrants attempted to free the others?" Eva jerked on the bottle of wine, pulling it free from Jayna, and she pulled the cork off, taking a long drink of it before setting the bottle back down.

Jayna sighed deeply. "So even if we stop these Celebrants, and we prevent Asymorn from returning . . ."

"It may be only the beginning of something more."

Jayna leaned back. In the time she'd served Ceran as Toral, she had experienced terrible dark magic, but mostly dark creatures. This was the first time she had ever faced dark sorcerers. She didn't care for it.

It was almost as if she were starting to truly understand some of the darkness that existed in the world, and some of the powers that threatened the world.

She had learned about some of that darkness when she found out what happened to her parents, but now she had to wonder how and why Jonathan had gotten caught up in it. How had he known Gabbranth?

If she could contain Gabbranth, she might get answers.

"We're going to stop them," Jayna said.

"I hope so," Eva whispered.

"We are going to keep the Celebrants from releasing Asymorn." And then they would have to uncover more about Asymorn. Whether Ceran could provide them with answers, or whether they went to another source, it didn't

matter. All that mattered was that she uncovered more details than what she had. If this was the kind of darkness Ceran wanted her to deal with, then she was determined to handle it.

She got to her feet. "It's time that we go and figure this out."

"Just the two of us?" Eva asked, taking a sip of wine.

"Why should it be anything different?"

Eva pushed the bottle of wine away, looking up at her. A dark smile crossed her face. "I suppose it shouldn't be."

"We can do this."

"Says you."

"Right. Says me. But we *can* do this. We've already proven we can pull the dwarding off and capture it. Now we just need to do it a few more times."

"Seven. That's not a few."

"Fine. All we need is to do it seven more times. When we do, then we can defeat the Celebrants."

"Sorcerers."

"I realize that."

"I just want to make sure you're on the same page. I know you've gained some power with your connection to your ring, but this is something more than you've dealt with before," Eva said.

It was, and it might even be more than Jayna could handle, but she wasn't about to tell Eva that. More than that, she wasn't about to tell Eva that she had a different sort of plan. It was one that involved pulling in other sorcerers, but only once the Celebrants revealed themselves. When they did, Jayna would lead them toward the outpost, toward the sorcerers there—and, unfortunately, to Char—where they would ensure that the Celebrants were defeated.

"We still have a little bit of daylight left. We might as well use it," Jayna said.

THE DAY PASSED FAR TOO QUICKLY. THE SKY WAS DARK, AND IT grew increasingly difficult for Jayna to think they had enough time to figure out what the Celebrants intended, or where they would hold the festival. If nothing else, they knew when this would take place, but not where.

She found herself patting her pocket periodically, ensuring she still had the enchantments tucked away inside, needing to keep them with her. They hadn't moved, much like they hadn't moved the last time, or the time before that. Each time she checked, she chided herself for her foolishness. They were on the outskirts of the city now, trailing along the forest edge. If the Celebrants needed the El'aras for power, it made her wonder if they might have come out here looking for a way to capture more. She hadn't seen any sign of that though. She still couldn't reach Ceran, though she continued to push power through the ring, attempting to reach him.

It was almost as if he were blocked from her.

Gabranth had to be doing that.

He knew about her. About Ceran.

And since his plan was coming to fruition soon, he didn't want anyone stopping him.

Smoke swirled from her, faint wisps of it. Jayna hadn't seen all that much smoke coming off of Eva today, but that wasn't uncommon. Eva had a careful nature to her magic. Either she didn't like to use it all that openly, or she preferred to hold on to it in ways that minimized how much power she poured out from her. There had to be a limit to the amount and kind of magic she could use.

"I don't detect anything, but the El'aras were out here," Jayna responded.

She had detected that much, but didn't know when the sorcerers were last here.

"I know they were out here," Eva said, laughing bitterly. It was growing increasingly dark, and though Jayna didn't have any way of telling the time, she suspected they were nearing midnight. The moment they did, they would have to be ready for an explosion of power. She wanted to find some of the Celebrants before then so she had a chance to prepare for the festival, but didn't even know where to begin.

"They were here, and—" Jayna started.

"And had no reason to stay here," Eva finished. "Once you freed them, they were always going to return to their lands."

"How do you think they were captured in the first place?"

"I don't even know. Sorcerers have particular magic that can mitigate natural magic," Eva said.

"Natural magic?"

"You might think the power that sorcerers hold is the most natural magic in the world, but it's the kind of magic that must be worked at. Look at all you put into creating your enchantments. All of that is work. It's not nearly as natural as what the El'aras, or others like them, use when it comes to pulling on their power."

Jayna looked to the smoke streaming off of Eva, and wondered if Eva would claim that her kind of magic was

natural. Maybe it was. There was no denying that the power of sorcery did involve elements of work that she had not seen from Eva before. Eva seemed to use her power more easily than any sorcerer, simply drawing it through the items that helped focus it, more than anything else.

"So, Master Raollet used some enchantment to capture them."

"Either he did or somebody working on his behalf," Eva said. She stared into the darkness, toward the trees.

"We're looking for power, aren't we?"

"We are. The dwarding will need to feed when they emerge so they can then feed him," Eva said.

That was what Rendal had said before he died, as well. They would need to feed, and given that they fed on magical energy, Jayna believed they would feed on something within the city. But what? Maybe the sorcerers who summoned them.

Even that didn't seem quite right. Why summon a creature like that if they didn't have any way of controlling it?

"And Raollet knows things about the city. Things like where the dwarding might need to feed," Jayna said.

Eva started to smile. "He isn't going to be very pleased to see us again."

"Probably not," Jayna said, grinning as she twisted the ring on her finger. "But since he sent his people after us, I think we have gotten even."

"He's not going to see it that way. How do we find him?" Eva asked.

"I don't think we have to worry too much about that." She motioned for Eva to follow her, and they made their way toward Master Raollet's shop. He wasn't too far from where they were. As they neared, Jayna started to notice someone following them.

She spun, immediately using a muted starburst pattern, and it slammed into three men.

She hurried over to the closest one, holding her hand out, ready for the blade of light pattern.

"If any of you move, she's going to suffocate you."

She pointed to Eva, hoping they had heard rumors about what Eva could do, and was relieved when one of them looked up with widened eyes.

Jayna smiled tightly. They had to be with Raollet, as he'd sent thugs after her already. "Good. You know what she can do. Now I just need to know where to find Raollet. And don't tell me you don't know how to find him."

The man shook his head.

"I don't need all three of you."

She used a blunted blade of light spell, sending it burning into his chest. It wouldn't kill him, just incapacitate him. She moved over to the next man. "If you don't want his fate, then you will speak."

He started babbling, stating street names and directions, which meant nothing to Jayna.

Eva nodded.

She knew where to go.

Jayna knocked him unconscious with the same blunted blade of light spell, then repeated the action on the third man.

When all the men were knocked out, Eva guided Jayna through the streets, weaving away from where they were, but not as far as Jayna would've expected. They stayed on the outskirts of the city, abutting the forest. As she neared the shop, there was a distinct energy in the air—sorcery.

She raised a hand, signaling to Eva to slow.

The street was dark, and given that it was going to be a new moon, there wouldn't even be moonlight for them to navigate by. A few stars twinkled in the sky overhead, and there were some lanterns glowing in windows, but they provided little illumination, leaving everything almost too dark.

"What is it?" Eva asked.

"There's something here," Jayna whispered.

Jayna turned in place, focusing on the sorcery she felt. There was a particular pattern she could use and embed power within to help her better detect sorcery when she had picked up on it already. She didn't use it all that often. There was no point in doing so. Typically, when she detected sorcery, she simply avoided it. Either that, or she knew that *she* was the reason it was nearby.

"I don't exactly know what it is, but I can detect it," Eva said.

The smoke around Eva started to swirl even more. It was a measure of her discomfort that she held on to as much smoke as she did, and that the smoke swirled around her like that. Jayna reached for as much power as she dared, holding on to it through the dragon stone ring. She didn't summon all of her power, and she didn't try reaching for any sorcery, but she wanted to be prepared.

The building was larger than the last one Raollet occupied, and made of a grayish stone, with the moss ever present in this part of the city having been scrubbed free.

She had to be ready.

Whether it took sorcery or her dragon stone power, she didn't care.

"We can do this," Jayna said to her.

"I know we can," Eva said. "But how much will it cost?"

Jayna didn't answer. It wasn't the monetary cost Eva was concerned about, but the magical cost.

She glanced up to the sky. They didn't have much time. Midnight would be here all too soon, and when it came . . .

They had to be ready.

They reached the door to Raollet's hideout. Now that she was close, Jayna could feel the energy coming out of the door, a distinct sense of pressure that pushed against her, reminding her of sorcery from when she'd been in the Academy. This was a protective barrier, but it wasn't a solidly made one.

At least, it was supposed to feel insubstantial.

Jayna held her hands out, focusing on magic. There was something out here. She could feel it. She pressed outward with a blunted starburst pattern, which caused the air to shimmer for a moment.

"Clever," she whispered.

"What is it?" Eva asked, smoke streaming off of her.

"He has a protection here, but he has it in place so we can detect it, but also so we think it's all he has."

"There's more?"

"At least one other layer."

It might be more than that, but it was going to take a distinct amount of sorcery for her to detect the difference between the layers of power, and Jayna wasn't at all interested in picking through those layers.

She looked over to Eva. "We need to ask him questions, right?"

"If you think so."

"He might know where to find power in the city. Something the *dwaring* might feed on." She lowered her voice as she said *dwaring*, not wanting to summon them, though maybe that would be easier and better for her.

"That is correct."

"Then we need to do this." She held out her hand, pointing the ring toward the door. She called power up through her, using the Toral ring, the energy within the dragon stone, triggered by her own innate sorcery.

It blasted through the protections.

As soon as they were down, she kicked open the door. Jayna stepped inside, bracing for Master Raollet to attack, and glanced back to see Eva coming in behind her, though facing the street. She held her hands at her side, the faint smoke drifting around her, twirling up her legs, along her arms, and then slowly floating outward.

Somebody moved.

Jayna reacted.

She unleashed a painful burst of power through the Toral ring.

There was no focus to it, no control, just a finely honed burst of magic that she could unload on anybody who might be coming at her.

It struck the attacker in the chest, the night too dark for her to see anything clearly, sending them staggering backward.

She glanced over to Eva. "There's at least one more person in here."

"Find the others," Eva said.

"What do you think I'm trying to do?"

Jayna strode forward, reaching the counter and the back of the new shop.

Master Raollet moved toward her. The location looked like it had been hastily organized, with boxes stacked and items placed haphazardly onto shelving, but not at all like his other shop had been.

He didn't have a cane, but he had a long staff, twisted and curved, the wood a strange dull black that he tilted toward her.

She held her hand up, focusing power through the dragon stone ring.

"If you want to keep that staff, then you will refrain from your attack," she said.

He glowered at her, still pointing the staff in her direction. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to ask you a question."

"Only a question? Not to destroy my shop like you did the last time?"

"What can I say? You're the one who had three El'aras captured."

"What do you care about the El'aras? They're our enemies."

Jayna grunted. The kingdom hadn't been at war with the El'aras for a long time. They might have an uneasy sort of

peace, but she knew better than to attack them. He should know better as well.

"I'm not going to instigate any war with the El'aras. Neither should you." She held on to the power within the Toral ring, ready to unleash it, but didn't want to if she didn't have to. She hoped she wouldn't need to, but worried it might become necessary. "All I need is help."

He pulled the staff back, watching her. "Help? After what you've done to my shop? Why should I be willing to help you?"

"You have no reason to help me. Other than the fact I intend to reveal to the Sorcerers' Society the items you had in your shop."

"You wouldn't," Master Raollet said.

"I may not be with the Society, but I know others who are. They would be most intrigued with the contents of your shop."

He angled the staff at her again. "How do you intend to do that if you can't walk?"

"How do you intend to blast me if you can't breathe?" Jayna twisted the ring, letting just a tiny bit of power seep out, illuminating the inside of this new shop. When he finished arranging everything, it might even be a little larger than the last one. It was a narrow band of energy, a bit of flame that poured out from her dragon stone ring, and he took a step back, lowering the staff. "All I need is the location of places in the city that might have power."

"So you can attack them?" he snapped.

"So I can protect them," she said.

He laughed darkly. "Protect. I've seen your kind before."

"Have you?"

He sneered at her. "I've seen your type, thinking they can offer protection. There is no protection. Not from the kingdom, and not from the Society."

She wasn't surprised that he didn't care for the Sorcerers' Society, given the nature of what she saw in his

shop, but she *was* surprised to find out that he didn't care for the kingdom.

"If you want to keep the contents of your shop a secret, you will tell me what I need to know."

"And the moment I tell you, those with the power you seek will be in danger."

Jayna just laughed. "These others are already in danger. I intend to help them."

He glanced from Jayna to Eva, squeezing the staff for a moment. "Help by attacking."

"You can believe me or not, but there's a dark energy that's about to be released in the city. I intend to stop it."

"How?"

"Does it matter?" Jayna asked.

"It matters if you want my assistance. How?"

Jayna glanced back to Eva, and made a point of continuing to hold her hand out, the energy pouring out of the Toral ring flowing steadily toward him. "Let's just say there is something incredibly dangerous within the city. If I don't stop it, no one can."

Master Raollet laughed. "You would have me believe you are some great sorcerer? I have never seen a sorcerer use one of those," he said, tipping his head toward the ring.

"What do you know about it?"

He stayed silent, but watched her for a long moment.

"Fine. Don't tell me." That wasn't why she was here, though she'd love to know *how* he'd heard of other Torals. That wasn't common knowledge. "But I'm not a sorcerer." There was a time when she wanted nothing more than to claim she was one. It was the reason she had gone to the Society and the Academy, the reason she had chased that power. She had wanted to know what she could do, how she could hold on to that power, but now . . .

Now she had a different purpose and mission.

"Where is there power?"

"I'm not going to—"

Jayna didn't give him a chance to finish. She blasted him with the Toral ring, and he went staggering back. She darted forward, grabbing the staff from him, sweeping it under his legs and dropping him to the ground. She tapped him on his chest. She could feel the staff was another enchantment, much like the cane she'd taken from him.

"We can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way. I would much rather find what you know about Asymorn more easily, but if you prefer another . . ."

He glowered at her. That was his only response.

Not one of recognition when she'd mentioned Asymorn. She had hoped he might know something more.

"Fine. Have it your way."

"Why are you asking me? You can just go to your precious Society and ask them. That is where you will find those with power."

Jayna shook her head. "Not the Society. They have shielding over their power."

The outpost protected them.

"Fine, then find someone who is like them. That's the only power source in the city now that the king has banished the fairies."

"Oh," Eva muttered.

Jayna looked over to her. There was only one other power.

Dular.

That was what it was. She should've considered looking for dular, especially as there were plenty of them within the city.

Eva shrugged. "I've heard some stirrings about the dular gathering."

"That's right." Raollet glanced from Eva to Jayna. "This time of the year is sacred to them."

Jayna turned back to Raollet.

"Where?" she asked him.

"I don't know. You go and look for it."

Jayna glanced to the staff. She could feel the enchantment within it. It summoned energy. "I'm going to borrow this."

"You will not."

She jabbed him on the chest with the staff, and he started coughing. "What does it do?" He glowered at her. "Don't make me use it on you."

His eyes went wide.

"There. I have your attention. It does something."

"It's a weapon. And it's old. A sorcerer made it so long ago that the forming of it has been lost, as has the knowledge of what it does."

Jayna eyed the staff. She hadn't been willing to go back for the cane, though maybe she should. A staff like this, however . . .

Eva frowned. "I know where we need to go."

"Where?" Jayna asked.

"The place the dular will gather. I think I know where to find it."

They headed out of the shop with Raollet shouting after them. As soon as they were out, Eva glanced back at the closed door, then to the staff in Jayna's hand, and shook her head. "This might be a mistake," she said to her.

"Taking his staff?"

"Antagonizing him. We've already been targeted by his thugs."

"And we've dealt with them just fine."

"He has access to resources."

"And we aren't going to be here much longer. Once this is over, I'm sure Ceran will send us somewhere else."

Eva looked like she wanted to argue, but clamped her mouth shut.

They had been here for long enough now. There were other places they needed to travel, other places Ceran would likely have jobs for her, and other places that would

draw her forward, likely posing a different sort of challenge for her.

"Are you sure about that?" Eva asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that I know you have enjoyed the opportunity to visit with your old friend."

"That bridge is already burned."

Char might've helped her with Rendal, but that didn't mean he would forgive her. She had used magic against him, stealing a lock of his hair. And he believed she was calling upon dark magic. Regardless of what she claimed, he wasn't going to believe otherwise.

"If you say so," Eva said.

"I do. Anyway, we need to get moving."

"I think I know where to find the festival," Eva said. "There is an ancient temple near the forest. If it's sacred, it seems to me it might be as good a place as any for them to gather."

Looking for the dular was something she should have thought about on her own. She shouldn't have needed Master Raollet to have prompted her. Worse, she worried that she had made an enemy of him.

Now that she had attacked him twice and taken two of his enchantments, she wasn't going to be able to remain in the city without watching for him—even more reason for her to get this over with, get to Ceran, and let him know the job was done so they could move on.

Eva guided them forward, saying nothing, though smoke trailed around her.

As they approached the temple, Jayna slowed.

Eva had called it a temple, but it was no different than some of the other stone debris that she had seen in other parts along the outskirts of the city. Perhaps a bit more extensive, with some walls still standing, moss coating everything, and a central clearing inside of an area that looked like it had once been walled off, but not what she

would call a temple. Still, there was an energy here she could feel, as if she might be able to detect what had been here when it *had* been a temple.

She could feel something different in the air. It was a soft energy, faint but growing stronger, a sort of power.

As she motioned to Eva with the staff, she moved off to the side of the road, staying in the shadows. Much like the location of Master Raollet's shop, the dular section of the city was an older one, and there were no people out, though at this time of night, she didn't expect there would be. She thought there might be some though. Even in this section of the city, people would be heading home from taverns and travelers would be looking for a place to stay, giving the area a feeling of normalcy.

The only thing she felt was energy—power—and the only thing she noticed was that something was off. It persisted, and as it did, it grew increasingly potent, enough so that she could feel the strength of the magic building around her.

It wouldn't be long now until the festival began in full.

She froze, looking all around her.

As they crept forward, reaching the edge of a wall, she saw a small clearing in the debris. There was a diffuse energy that permeated everything. And the clearing wasn't empty at all.

Eva stiffened next to her. The smoke that had been trailing around her seemed to intensify, swirling even more vibrantly.

In the center of the square were seven figures all arranged in a circle—including Topher. They were bound at their hands and ankles, tied together so they were forced to kneel. All of them faced inwardly, and a darkened figure stood in the center of them, hands outstretched.

Jayna couldn't see any of the other Celebrants of Asymorn, but they had to be there.

This was the festival.

Jayna remained tense. She focused on the power she could summon, but feared she was too late.

"I really wish Ceran would answer," Jayna whispered.

"I don't know that we can wait for him. We are going to have to do this."

"You'll help?"

Eva looked conflicted.

"We can stop this," Jayna said, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

"I'm not sure about that," Eva said.

Eva nodded, and as she did, Jayna realized that a strange dark shadow swirled around each of the men. She hadn't seen it before, but now that she did, she could see nothing else. It was an energy that pulsed outward, pressing upon her. It was the energy of the dwarding.

They were there. They had fed, and they had matured.

Now they were powerful.

Soon they would be released.

And if the sorcerer standing in the middle of them had anything to do with that, they would use that power to tap into Asymorn, possibly freeing him and the dark power he summoned.

"It seems we don't have much time," Jayna said.

"I worry that it's more than just time," Eva said. "I worry they are already too powerful."

THIS WAS GOING TO BE FAR MORE THAN SHE COULD STOP ON HER own. As Jayna crouched in the alley near the edge of the street, feeling the familiar tightness to her skin from the energy coming off of the sorcerers, along with the unpleasant dark power radiating from the dawning, she prepared for the attack while trying to send an urgent summons to Ceran through the ring. She had to be ready. The power would continue to build if she didn't hurry.

"How much longer do you think we have until the new moon?"

"Considering the energy I feel already, I suspect we're getting close," Eva said. She had her back pressed up against one of the nearby buildings, and a thin wisp of smoke trailed around her, continuing to build in intensity.

Jayna clutched the staff. It might help, if she learned how to use it.

"Then we need to try to stop them. Somehow."

The man at the center of the circle of captives seemed to be the heart of whatever was taking place. Gabranth. He looked even more regal than when he had attacked her in the street before. She could feel the power coming off of him, a mixture of magic that she could scarcely comprehend. This was a powerful sorcerer at the height of

his powers, preparing for a festival that would make him even more powerful.

If he were to succeed, he would release Asymorn—and be gifted with so much more.

Maybe she could draw off enough of the dwarfing energy to conceal her presence here. She pulled one of the enchantments out of her pocket.

“You think I can summon the dwarfing from here?” she asked, whispering to Eva.

“I don’t know. The last time it was challenging.”

“The last time we didn’t know what we were dealing with.”

Eva looked down at her, holding her gaze for a moment. “Do you know what you’re dealing with now?”

“I know it’s a dwarfing.”

“And do you understand what that is?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m getting at the fact that this is nothing like you have faced before.”

“I understand, but—”

“But now there are seven of them. I know you want to prevent the attack, but I also don’t know if you’re going to be able to.”

“You don’t think I have enough power.” Jayna smiled to herself. All this time, Eva had always supported her, and though Eva had not always been the easiest to work with, she had never expected Eva would doubt her like this. She supposed she should not be terribly surprised by it.

In fact, Eva had drunk quite a bit of wine earlier in the day, and might even be influenced by that.

“We just have to start with one,” Jayna said.

“See if you can,” Eva responded.

“You’re afraid,” Jayna stated.

Eva watched her before tearing her gaze away and looking into the distance. “You should be too.”

Jayna held on to the enchantment, then rolled it across the stone. She added a hint of a spell to it, muting the sound of its travel until it got near enough to Topher. She nudged it just a little bit farther. When it reached him, she smiled to herself. All she needed was to get close enough to him so that she could use a spell; she could wrap the power around him and perhaps hold it close enough to him.

It was the proximity she needed.

Plus, she had the tracking enchantment Topher had given her.

That would help. She could link the two enchantments.

An idea came to her.

The El'aras enchantment had muted her magic when she'd tested it in her home.

Maybe it could do that now. It might be able to protect her from the sorcerers knowing what she was doing.

If only she could use power through it.

Jayna clutched the enchantment, feeling the strange vibration within it. A linking spell was easy enough. It was one of the first she'd seen in the Academy. Now she just had to add one to this stone . . .

When it was done, a sense of Topher came through the enchantment. It would work. It would have to.

She braced herself.

From a distance, it was going to be hard to pull the dwarding out of Topher, but she could detect it inside of him, having felt it before, and Jayna thought she should be able to peel it apart from Topher again.

She pressed outward.

She let a hint of energy flow. Just a hint, nothing more than that, and when she did, she unleashed it, letting power slide away from her.

It struck the enchantment, triggering it. It was a containment spell. Now she only had to peel the dwarding away from Topher.

As she stretched out magically, the distance was a challenge, but she tapped into the enchantment itself, pushing her connection from herself through it and up into Topher.

She could feel the dark energy within him. The dwarding surged, filling him with power, yet also consuming him. That was what she had to work against.

"You had better hurry," Eva said.

"We have time," she said.

"For now, but I have a feeling you don't have nearly as much time as you think. There will be others."

Jayna looked around the clearing, but she didn't see any of the other sorcerers, only the single sorcerer in the center. Still, she knew the other Celebrants of Asymorn had to be here, as Eva suggested.

"Go make sure they don't interfere," she said to Eva.

"This is your spell. You should be the one to do that."

"Can you just help me?" she hissed.

Eva shook her head. "Fine, but I don't like it."

"You never like it."

Jayna turned her attention back to the enchantment, and to Topher, and to the power she was pushing out from him and into the dwarding trying to feed on him. She could practically feel the way it consumed him and the energy that flowed from it, trapping some part of him. Jayna reached for that and began to pull it back.

The dwarding fought.

She sent out a swirl of power from the dragon stone ring, twisting it around him and wrapping it in a tight spiral to contain the dark energy. In doing so, she could feel that energy continuing to surge, but thankfully, the Toral ring contained the power, and she managed to hold on to it. The next step was trying to pull it into the enchantment.

That was going to be the hardest part. When she had done it before, she had not been dealing with a mature

dwaring, and she had also been closer. Proximity mattered, especially for this kind of magic.

She was going to have to focus.

She sent another cycle of power out, letting it spiral around Topher again. Fortunately, she didn't seem to be drawing anybody else's attention. As she started to pull, the dark energy continued to fight against her.

Jayna drew it deeply into the enchantment.

She held her focus on the enchantment, linking its power with that of the dwaring, then pulling the dwaring inside the enchantment itself.

There was movement near her.

Sorcerers.

Jayna could feel the dwaring starting to pull into the enchantment, but it didn't happen quickly enough—the enchantment wasn't strong enough. As she pulled the power of the enchantment down, siphoning it in, she feared it wasn't going to be enough. She had to draw even more of her own energy down.

It started to work.

She sent another surge of sorcery into the enchantment, triggering it in full.

Doing so risked exposing her presence here, but she had to get that dwaring inside.

The enchantment took on more power. It started to glow softly. Thankfully, it seemed as if Topher's body blocked the glowing of the enchantment from the sorcerer at the center of the clearing, but she feared waiting too long.

Already she worried that the other sorcerers knew she was here and were heading in her direction. She couldn't linger for much longer. She had to get this to work.

Now that the enchantment was active, she focused on the dragon stone, the Toral ring, and started to pull.

That offered a very different approach to magic. It was connected to dark energy, attracted to it, and, if she were honest with herself, could also use it. She pulled, and the

dwaring fought, but she had already lashed herself and her energy around the dwaring, and she drew it down into the enchantment.

She could feel the dwaring slithering, the strange clawing of something that was actually alive starting to rise against her, as if it were working actively to escape. It was so different from when she had fought other dark energies before. This was something feeding on a sorcerer, on somebody who had power, and this was something that continued to call power outward.

Jayna had to try something else.

If she disrupted the sorcerer, she might be able to buy herself a little bit more time.

Which meant she would have to rely on Eva keeping the others safe.

And she would have to draw off the other Celebrants of Asymorn.

She focused on Topher.

Get the creature out of Topher, and then . . .

There.

The enchantment started to hold.

No longer did she have to pull quite as much power out on her own or focus as hard as she had before. Now she could let the enchantment do the work. The energy started to cycle quickly, and as it did, it pulled inward, drawing the dwaring off of the poor man. It cycled downward, flowing deeper and deeper into the enchantment until it sealed it.

Then Jayna jerked, using a bit of sorcery to pull the enchantment back to her. As it rolled across the cobblestones, it made too much noise.

There came a flicker of movement.

Jayna looked up just as the enchantment arrived.

She clasped the enchantment, using her painful Toral power to seal the dwaring inside, hoping that would work. Eva would need to use her own magic to complete the seal, but for now it seemed as if she had trapped the dwaring.

Another sorcerer approached.

She didn't recognize this one, but he stalked toward her.

He reminded her a bit of Rendal and the dark energy he had inside of him. Jayna remembered just how difficult it had been to contain that dark energy within him.

She wouldn't have much choice in how she handled this other sorcerer.

Pulling the dark energy off was going to be the key. If she tried to simply stop him, he would keep fighting.

She held out the dragon stone ring, and focused on the power deep within her.

It was her least favorite use of magic.

A cold feeling worked up her arm quickly. She tried not to draw upon the power of the ring too deeply, but ever since using it on Rendal, that cold seemed to creep into her even faster than it normally did. She had touched the darkness, and she had tainted herself.

She didn't have much choice in the matter, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to fight the darkness. She focused the power from the Toral ring tightly, wrapping it into an increasingly tighter spiral mixed with a blade of light spell, and sent it blasting out.

It streaked away from the dragon stone ring in a narrowing spiral until it came to a point. It twisted and shot the sorcerer in the chest. He collapsed.

Jayna looked up, knowing that the action, and his sudden fall, would draw the attention of the sorcerer at the center of the clearing.

She had to work quickly.

She hurried over to the fallen sorcerer, checking to see if he was going to get up, but he was no longer breathing. It didn't take long before the dark magic consumed him, and then it would fade, disappearing back into the ether where it had come from.

As he faded, she shifted her focus.

She pushed more enchantments across the distance, making sure to hold on to their power so they were silenced, and rolling them toward the men on either side of Topher. When they reached their respective destinations, she focused on the first man, wrapping a tight spiral of power around him, then hurriedly began to pull on the dwarding after activating the enchantment.

Having done so once, she was prepared for the fighting, and as that energy started to rise and fight against her, she constricted it even more tightly, binding it up within the enchantment. Then she started to drag it down, away from the poor injured man.

She didn't know if this was the tavern owner, one of the regulars who had visited the tavern, or someone different entirely, perhaps one of the three strangers who had also been attacked.

It didn't matter.

All that mattered was that she had to use her energy, and she had to pull it deeper and deeper into the enchantment.

This time, she tried a different approach, activating the enchantment with even more power. She sent a surge of power outward. More strength.

The enchantment triggered, and it ensnared the dwarding, and it pulled down, collapsing the creature inside.

Jayna sank down. That had been exhausting.

And to think she still had five more of these to do.

She pulled the enchantment back to her, tapped on it with a seal of power from the dragon stone, and stuffed it into her pocket with the other one.

Five to go.

She started to focus on the other enchantment when she noticed movement near her. She turned, but it was too late.

It was a blast of power that struck her, unfocused, but pure.

It threw her down to the cobblestones. She lost the staff.

Jayna started to get up, but another blast of power struck her.

She struggled against it, but it continued to collapse down, as if some film of energy worked to trap her.

Suffocating her.

She scrambled, twisting her hand so that her dragon stone ring was facing up, and she focused a blast through it, using both the energy of the dragon stone ring and sorcery in a starburst pattern.

As the blast tore through the film of energy around her, Jayna scrambled to her feet and looked around.

Gabranth turned toward her. She caught a glimpse of his face, though it was hidden in shadows. He was lean, with deep, hollow eyes that looked as if the night sank into them completely, and wore a jet-black, flowing cloak. His long, dark hair hung past his shoulders, and though his hands were pointed at the sky, he looked as if he could turn dark energy to her in a heartbeat.

Power slammed into her again.

Jayna was thrown off to the side, and she rolled over to see another one of the sorcerers coming toward her. She twisted, trying the snake spell she had learned from Gabranth, squeezing it around the sorcerer. She constricted it as tightly as she could, thankful the spell worked for her as well as it did.

He collapsed.

Jayna scrambled forward.

It was too late to do so in secret. Now it was a matter of simply stopping the Gabranth.

As she ran toward the captives, something grabbed at her, dragging her off her feet. She looked over to see the other sorcerer who had attacked her in the very first tavern. He had a whip of some dark energy stretching from his hand, and it wound along her ankles, holding her.

She battered at it, trying to use magic from the dragon stone ring, but even that wasn't enough. It forced her to try

a different approach.

Jayna attempted the blade of light. She was unsure if it would work, but it came to her quickly, and she honed the edge to a sharp blade as rapidly as she could, as Ceran had taught her, flicking it outward so the blade carved through the dark magic holding her ankles. It *had* worked.

She was freed.

Jayna staggered to her feet, spinning and sending another spiral of magic at him.

He was better equipped to fight. He blocked her move, and her power was deflected up where it exploded into the sky.

Distantly, she was aware of Eva fighting with someone else. She couldn't see much of anything, only the haze of smoke that swirled around them. Eva, at least when she was sober, was a skilled fighter. She didn't necessarily need magic. She had a pair of long-bladed knives she kept hidden under her dress, or cloak, depending on what she wore that day. She didn't worry that Eva would be in any particular danger, but she also didn't want to leave her struggling.

She never learned how Eva knew how to fight, but then, Eva might not even know.

Either way, Jayna needed her help.

Jayna targeted the sorcerer Eva fought, sending a blast of magic at him, spiraling it in a rapid, tight fashion, and it wrapped itself up, catching him in the chest.

He blocked it, but it still knocked him back.

She darted forward, already beginning a starburst pattern, mixing her sorcery with the dragon stone ring. As she blasted outward, the combination was incredible. Far more powerful than she had expected. The magic carved through him.

There was no blood—magical injuries never really bled—but it did slice through him, severing his connection to magic, and killing him in the process.

The sorcerer collapsed.

She tried to ignore what she'd done, but could not.

She'd dealt with dark magic users before, and had killed dark creatures, but this was different. This was a person.

A sorcerer—dark and dangerous—but now they were gone.

Because of her.

Jayna spun, turning her attention back to the clearing. There were still five injured men, five captives who still had dawning within them, and as she watched, she could practically see the dark energy inside them starting to erupt.

Would the five she hadn't saved provide enough energy to free the power of Asymorn?

Jayna didn't know, but as she looked over, Eva battled with a pair of sorcerers and was forced backward. Eva had her hands raised, smoke swirling around her, but it wasn't enough. Eva struggled.

Jayna debated. If she went to Eva, she could help her, but she also needed to stop this sorcerer.

She needed to do both.

She attempted the starburst pattern, imbuing it with the energy of the dragon stone ring, and shooting it toward the Celebrant of Asymorn. The energy blasted him, yet he barely moved.

At least it startled him.

He lowered his hands just a little bit. Jayna used that opportunity to strike again, sending another tight spiral toward him, blasting him with a mix of power and sorcery.

Then she moved on, racing to where she detected Eva.

She found her in a cloud of smoke. Two others surrounded her, approaching, and as Jayna came up behind them, she flicked her wrist, using the blade of light spell, adding a bit of power from the dragon stone ring, and carving through the first man.

He dropped.

"Don't worry about me," Eva shouted.

“He was going to—”

“He was going to do nothing. I need you to stop the other sorcerer before he frees the other creatures.”

Jayna looked to the other sorcerer attacking Eva, but realized that Eva was probably right. She did need to move on. She needed to focus on Gabranth.

As she turned her attention back to the center of the clearing, Gabranth raised his hands again. Darkness began to bulge from the five other captives.

JAYNA GRABBED THE STAFF OFF THE GROUND AND RAN FORWARD. She reached the edge of the circle, but could go no farther. There was some sort of barrier around them. She tried to hold out one of the enchantments, thinking that she might slip it underneath, but it was too late.

Gabranth already knew how she had done it.

She had to limit his power somehow, as it was building.

She could see it, but she could also feel it. It continued to flow, growing outward, and the more it did, the easier it was for her to feel it as it exploded upward.

Before long, the dwarding would escape.

Then the Celebrants of Asymorn would succeed. They would reach for Asymorn, and they would free him.

Jayna had to try something else.

She pressed her hand up against the barrier, which she could feel but couldn't see. She traced the blade of light pattern, blasting power through it. She added cold, burning magic from the dragon stone ring to the pattern, feeling it working up her arm, into her elbow, then beyond. There came a faint shimmering, a sizzling of electric energy along the barrier, but then her magic failed.

Her magic wasn't enough.

Jayna called on additional power, letting it flow out from her, and she attacked, blasting the power outward. When it struck, it did the same thing. It left strange sizzling lines of orange and red swirling along the bubble of energy before dissipating altogether. There came a flutter of darkness, but nothing more than that.

Gabranth turned to her. He kept his hands held up to the sky, grinning at her. "Do you really think you can stop this? I've been working for this moment far longer than you've been alive."

"I *will* stop it," Jayna said.

"You do not have enough power."

She tried again. She had to call upon her dragon stone magic even more intensely. She had to find some way of connecting through it, reaching for Ceran's power. She might not be able to summon him, but she could use his power, and if she called upon it enough, maybe he would realize that she needed him.

She tried another starburst pattern, mixing it with dragon stone energy, and it failed. Then she tried the blade of light again, though doubted it would be strong enough.

She pointed the staff, spilling a hint of her natural sorcery into it . . . and it did nothing. Had Raollet lied to her about the staff?

Gabranth grinned at her. "Soon they will be released. Soon the dark power will emerge and we will have all we need."

"You don't look like you ever have all that you need," she snapped, taunting him.

"You have already failed. I don't need all of the dwarding for this to succeed."

She tried to move forward, dragging the staff with her. "Then why take seven dwarding?"

"Because I need them." His gaze drifted to the captives. Jayna's heart skipped a beat.

He needed the dwarding for whatever he was doing, regardless of what he said. That dark power mattered to him in some way, but she had no idea what it was or what it meant.

The dark power was more than just the dwarding.

That was what troubled her the most. Not only did he need the dwarding, but he needed the hosts. Sacrifices.

Too often with the kind of dark magic she dealt with, there were sacrifices. It wasn't always necessary, but there was something about blood, pain, and death that fed dark magic, fed these dark energies that existed in the world.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"You will be a witness. Then you will be used."

Jayna looked over. Eva still battled with the other sorcerer, though the smoke swirling around her provided some sort of barrier that prevented the sorcerer from getting too close. Jayna didn't see any sign of any of the other sorcerers around herself. If they reached her, she would have to be ready to fight.

First, though, she had to get through this barrier.

She focused on the power within her. She tried to call upon the energy from the dragon stone ring again, this time placing both hands up against the barrier. She traced all of the spells Ceran had taught her, using the most destructive energies she could think of, using as much magic through the Toral ring as she could.

There was a limit to how fast she could trace those patterns on the barrier, knowing that if she were to do so too quickly, she would fail in creating them. Still, if she had learned nothing else from her experience with sorcery over the last year, she had learned to create the sort of destructive and powerful magic that would allow her to unleash all of the energy within her.

If she were to succeed, if she were to break through the barrier, Jayna worried that she still wouldn't be able to

defeat him if she reached him—or that his spell might be too far along already.

She couldn't fear that. Instead, she had to focus on what she *could* do.

Dropping the staff—it hadn't been useful anyway—she pressed her hands up against the barrier again.

The power built inside her.

Sorcery came from a place deep within the spellcaster. It was a mixture of the natural and the magical, a connection to some part of her that was tied to energy beyond her comprehension. Regardless of what Eva might claim, a sorcerer did have natural, intrinsic magic. It was the only way she would be able to use the kind of power she could summon. She could feel that energy within her, how it bubbled up, and she knew that all she needed to do was reach for it—then she could unleash it.

Jayna focused on it.

She had been mixing the power of sorcery with that of the dragon stone ring. There was some intrinsic magic to the ring itself, a residual energy from the enchantment that had gone into its making that she never really understood. Then there was what connected her to Ceran.

But there was something else too.

There was the darkness she had glimpsed.

Power that could bubble up from within her.

If she were willing to connect to it.

She was afraid.

She was afraid of the pain. Of the cold. And she was afraid of surrendering to the darkness. As the dark energy came through her, she connected the Toral magic with her sorcery.

In her experience, the combination was enough that it could often be far more explosive and destructive than one alone.

She didn't have much time. She could feel that whatever this man was doing would happen soon. He kept his hands

raised overhead, and she felt power build, but it was not just the power within him. It was the power he summoned, the energy of the dwarding that he used.

"All this for me?" she asked.

"There's nothing you can do to stop this," he said.

He pressed his hands up.

The dwarding started to emerge.

Jayna had to act quickly.

She called upon as much power as she could, attempting to draw some out of the ring, through her, but knowing it probably would not be enough. So far, nothing had been enough—not against Gabranth, a sorcerer who had far more knowledge than she did. Gabranth might've even been difficult for Ceran to defeat. He knew some way of limiting Ceran's influence, so he probably wouldn't be worried to face him.

As another blade of light crashed into the barrier, she had a moment when she thought it *was* going to be enough.

She could feel the barrier starting to part, some aspect of it fading, and she tried to stretch through it, but then it solidified again.

It was the dark energy. It was the dwarding that formed the barrier itself.

Gabranth turned to her, grinning. "Did you think it would be so easy? Did you think you were the first of your kind whom I have faced?"

He was powerful. More powerful than anything she had ever handled before.

This was the kind of thing that needed a Sul'toral, not a Toral; the situation needed somebody who could handle that kind of dark power.

Where was Ceran?

She was tired. She had already expended considerable power, and she worried that she wouldn't have enough energy remaining even if she were able to break through this barrier.

She pushed more energy through the dragon stone ring, sending a summons out to Ceran.

He needed to know the risk.

He needed to know he was needed.

Hopefully Ceran realized she was using more power than she ever had before, even if he couldn't detect her summons.

"Eva!"

Eva was still surrounded by smoke, and she was far enough away that Jayna didn't know if she was going to be able to help.

"Finish your sorcerer, and get over here!"

Gabranth laughed. His hands shifted position.

It occurred to her that they had been in a steady position all along, but as they shifted, it seemed as if they were turning as hands of a clock might, positioned in such a way so that he could summon the power coming from the new moon. Once the dward escaped into the night . . .

She saw it.

There was a strange rent in the sky. A dark streak that gradually started to tear.

They didn't have much time before Gabranth succeeded.

The power he summoned was incredible. This was no simple dark sorcerer.

She battered at the barrier, but she needed something more.

There came an explosion of heat, and she looked back to see Eva striding toward her, smoke swirling around her more thickly than it ever had before. Blood trailed behind her as she walked, and as soon as it struck the stones, it started to smoke and swirl, spiraling around her.

Her face glowed, but so too did her entire body. It was almost as if the heat and energy that created the smoke came from inside of her.

Jayna wondered about Eva once again, but as with each time she questioned, she knew there wouldn't be any

answer. Eva wouldn't tell her anything more, and for that matter, Jayna didn't know that it even mattered. At this point, all that mattered was trying to find the key to breaking through the barrier.

"What do you think? Any thoughts on getting stronger here?" Jayna asked Eva.

"I won't be able to help you with this."

She'd helped before, why not now?

The faint glowing of her skin started to dissipate.

That was why.

Eva was spent too.

"Looks we won't be able to stop it," Jayna said. Her gaze went to the rent in the sky, the tear that ripped through the fabric of night. The dawning were pulsating, stretching away from their hosts.

Asymorn would use the power they'd fed on. Then he'd be free.

Once that power was unleashed, there would be too much dark energy for her.

"You have another option," Eva said softly.

"What option is that?"

"The ring," Eva whispered.

"I've been using the ring."

"You've been using it the way they taught you to, but now you need to use it the way I know you're capable of using it. You can tap into that power."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You do," Eva said.

Jayna looked at her, holding her gaze, then turned her attention to the smooth surface of the pale white dragon stone ring.

Did she?

She had certainly felt that energy before, but never easily.

And there was always the fear of what might happen were she to delve too deeply into that power. There was

pain. The cold, horrible pain.

And the darkness that she knew existed within that power.

But now they didn't have much time.

The rent in the sky grew ever larger, and though Gabranth ignored her, knowing he didn't need to pay any attention to her now, soon he would finish, and when he was done, he would have all of the power of Asymorn, that dark energy freed, and he would be able to unload it upon her. Upon Jayna. Upon any others who were here. All of them would suffer under that power.

The real power of the ring was darkness.

That dark energy was there, always a promise.

But to stop darkness, she needed darkness.

Jayna took a deep breath, and she pressed the ring up against the barrier.

She started calling on that energy.

There was always the superficial power, but beyond it came something more. She had feared reaching or risking falling victim to that something more. She had drawn upon it only a few times by accident, and each time, she had come away feeling darkened, dirtied, as if she were already starting to fade.

In this case, she would need to call upon it intentionally; she would try to reach for that power so it would grant her something more than she could ever imagine having on her own. It was that something extra that she needed to find right now.

She stared straight ahead. Her focus went elsewhere, to the power within the ring, to the power at the fringe of the ring, and to that something beyond.

It was that something beyond that the dragon stone ring helped her tap into, and Jayna needed to tap into it if it would help her stop this dark energy, even if doing so meant she had to access a dark energy herself.

She started summoning power.

Pain filled her quickly, forcing up her arm, into her chest, and all the way through her, faster than it ever had before.

She wanted nothing more than to release the energy, but she had no choice but to let it continue to fill her. She needed that power. She needed every bit of it so she could stop Gabranth.

It came to her slowly.

At first, it came up through the dragon stone ring, but gradually it built, drawing off of that peripheral energy. Normally, she didn't focus on it, but now she used it directly. The true power of the Toral ring. There was darkness within it. There was no denying that fact, but there was something else buried there as well.

Heat. Flames. Light.

It was a mixture.

Perhaps that was what she needed to hold on to. The mixture of the light in the dark.

Jayna held on to as much power as she could. It filled her.

Gabranth ignored her, as if knowing she could do nothing.

And she couldn't. Not against the barrier.

The cold was overwhelming. Nauseating.

But it was nothing compared to the energy she glimpsed. Was it Ceran's true magic? Or maybe this was something more—the power he had warned her against pursuing.

Whatever it was, she would have to use it.

She could practically feel the terror in the sky as dark energy opened in front of her. She wanted nothing more than to close it.

She wouldn't get many chances. Just this one.

She focused.

Distantly, she was aware of Eva whispering something to her—reassurance or something else—but she realized the words Eva said were not words Jayna understood; rather, they were a steady murmuring in Eva's native tongue.

There was a harshness to them, along with a heat, as if she were speaking through crackling flames that burned at her.

Jayna ignored that.

She pushed out power.

She brought her hand down, slamming it onto the stone of the ruined temple.

It cracked, shattering and exploding the way the stone inside of Master Raollet's shop had exploded, but an order of magnitude more; energy roiled outward, and the ground trembled.

The stone she'd been standing on dropped out from beneath her, sending her toppling into a shadowed chamber below.

But it dropped Gabranth down, as well.

His spell faltered.

She didn't have much time.

She staggered forward, still holding on to the ring, still having some power remaining, and she blasted at the sorcerer, sending a twisting spiral of power at him. It streaked like a crossbow bolt unleashed at him, and it hit some protective barrier around him. Gabranth's power started to dissipate, and he shifted.

As he did, the tear in the sky shifted with him, closing.

He frowned at her. "Did you really think I could be stopped so easily?"

That was easy?

That had taken everything Jayna had and more.

But they were through the barrier.

She started toward him, trying to find the strength within her.

"You are through only the first layer, but it's not over," he said.

"You won't be able to finish it."

Jayna held her hands out to either side, and filled with that strange power within her, sent streamers from her hands, wrapping them around each of the remaining

captives with dwarfing hosted within them, and started to pull the power of the dwarfing down, forcing it away from the tear in the sky.

She needed the enchantments, but she needed to prevent the dwarfing from fueling Asymorn and his release.

"You know so little, Toral. Perhaps your Sul'toral could teach you, if only he weren't terrified of the lessons you might learn."

He turned toward her, and he began to twist his hands, the pattern far more complicated than Jayna could follow. She noticed he was spinning his hands, and power was building as he did so, a spiral of energy that continued to grow, rising up as his hands created the pattern. He smiled at her, a dark energy within his eyes.

"And now you will be added to the rest."

"No." She looked over to Eva, but she remained over Jayna's shoulder, whispering softly. The smoke swirled, and it radiated outward, flowing out from Eva and into Jayna.

Strange that she would use it in such a way.

The cold continued to fill her, but it wasn't quite as overwhelming as it had been before. Maybe there was something about the way Eva used her smoke that alleviated some of the cold feeling, though that was a thought for another time.

She staggered forward. Gabranth had still not fully recovered, and there was no barrier blocking her. Up above, she could feel sorcery. She had no idea what it was. Other Celebrants?

Or worse, the Society?

She reached Gabranth. "What did you do to my brother?"

He looked at her, darkness flashing in his eyes. Power continued to build from him.

He was going to try again.

"What did you do to him?"

He started to smile.

She kicked. He dropped to his knees.

The ground began to tremble, and darkness started to split the sky again. She didn't see Gabranth using another spell, but he had already proven he didn't need to hold on to a spell the same way she did. He knew far more than her.

She didn't have time. She wouldn't find her answers.

She wasn't going to learn what happened to Jonathan.

But there was something she could do. She could stop Gabranth.

The cold still filled and overwhelmed her. She mixed Toral ring power with a blade of light and blasted it through him.

Gabranth's eyes went wide, and the tear in the sky collapsed with an explosion.

He sank down to the stone, and Jayna sank down next to him.

Tears streamed down her eyes.

JAYNA STRUGGLED TO GET TO HER FEET. SHE WAS HOLDING ON TO the power, which she still vaguely felt, but strangely, as that energy streaked out from her, she could feel it drawn off from some distant location. It was a sort of power she had never known before, but she knew it was important for her to understand. She tried not to think what it meant, tried not to recognize that whatever it was, whatever power she was holding on to, had tinges of darkness within it.

In fact, it was more than tinges of darkness. She could feel the dark energy there, and despite any protestation she might make to the contrary, that dark energy filled her. It was that dark energy that had allowed her to break through the barrier.

Now she had to use it for something else: to find a way to help the remaining injured. She felt sorcery, and she looked up. A lone figure in the scarlet robes of the Society jumped down one of the tilted rock walls that had collapsed during the explosion.

She had no idea why Char would have come.

Char reached her, helping her to her feet. "I felt a surge through our link and knew I had to come. Who was that?"

Jayna wondered why he should suddenly feel a surge, but was thankful he had. She was getting tired. She

couldn't hold on to this energy for much longer, though she had a feeling she needed to—at least for a little while. If she lost control . . .

She couldn't think that way. She couldn't lose control. At this point, losing control meant she was going to lose, period.

She was determined *not* to lose.

"Gabranth, one of the Celebrants of Asymorn," she muttered.

"When this is over, I need you to tell me everything you can about this."

"When this is over, I'm not sure you'll *want* to know everything about it," she said.

He looked around, his entire posture tense, and she could feel the magic radiating off of him. He was upset. Possibly even angry. But he was here.

"Can you help them?" he asked, looking to the others who were injured.

Jayna went to Topher and grabbed for her own belt knife, cutting the bindings of his wrists and ankles, freeing him. She checked his neck, feeling for the pulse, thankful he was still breathing and had good circulation.

They would have to heal him after this was all over.

She went on to the next injured person, checking him like she had with Topher, and when she was satisfied that he was equally intact, she looked over to Char. "I don't know what more to tell you. We interrupted the festival before they succeeded, and killed the sorcerer responsible," she went on, looking over to Gabranth, still unable to believe he was dead, "but we still have dwarding to deal with."

She looked up, and the rent in the sky was gone. Everything within her felt off. The energy pulsed somewhere distantly, yet the more she held on to it, the more she began to worry she would be drawn into the

darkness, forced to serve that dark energy, forced to use power she knew she should not.

She looked around the crumbling temple. "I can pull the dwarding back, but I don't know if I have enough strength to push them into the enchantment," she said, looking over to Eva.

The smoke still swirled around Eva, but it wasn't quite as prominent as it had been before. It lingered, drifting toward Jayna, and it seemed as if Eva needed to push her smoke into Jayna to protect her in some way.

"I can help," Char said.

Jayna swung her head over to him. His dark hair stood on end, and in the shadows of the deep night, she couldn't make out his features that well, but imagined him looking at her with his usual earnest expression. "You don't want anything to do with this."

Somewhere nearby, she could feel magic surging again. The Society was coming.

She wanted to leave, but if she did, the dwarding might not be dealt with the way they needed to be. The Society would question dark magic. They wouldn't have encountered it the same way she had, and they wouldn't know what to do.

She had to deal with it.

"Maybe I don't, but that doesn't mean I can't help. This is about healing, isn't it?" Char asked.

Jayna nodded slowly. "It's about healing, but it's also going to be difficult."

"Because it has something to do with dark magic?"

Jayna sighed. She needed to act quickly. What was she doing having a conversation with Char at this point?

Before the Sorcerers' Society reached her, she had to remove the dwarding. And then destroy them. Somehow.

"Dark powers fill these creatures," Jayna said.

"What happens when you capture them?" he asked.

"Then we have to hold them."

"Can you?"

Jayna didn't know. They still had the first dwarding they'd captured tonight, and though they had pulled it off, holding it in the enchantment, she didn't know if the enchantment would hold it indefinitely. Most enchantments eventually faded.

"I'll deal with that when this is done," she muttered.

"Then let's get it over with," Char said.

She looked over to Eva, who just nodded.

Jayna sank to her knees in the center of the clearing. "I'm tired. I can pull the dwarding off, but you're going to have to pull it out of them," she said, looking over to Char. "It's difficult."

"I can do it," he said.

Jayna forced a smile. "If anyone can, it's you."

Even if he could do it, did she want him to? This meant involving him in her life, in her magic, and it meant bringing him into something he wanted nothing to do with.

And if she didn't . . .

Jayna knew what would happen if she didn't. The dwarding would finish feeding. Already she had seen the dwarding starting to stretch, straining to escape from their hosts, slowly expanding as the power began to stretch outward, flowing fingers of darkness stretching away from them.

She nodded. She pulled out the remaining five enchantments and handed them over to Char.

"What are these?"

"These are the enchantments I made to contain the other dwarding."

"You made them?"

"You don't have to say it like that. I know they aren't nearly as good as yours, but they were the best I could do at the time."

"I wasn't trying to criticize you," he said hurriedly. "I was just trying to say—"

"I know what you're trying to say. And it's fine. I made them."

"These will work great," he said.

She looked over, waiting for him to admit he was being sarcastic, but she didn't have any sense of that from him.

Save the captives.

That was what she had to do now. She still had strength to do that.

She had to work quickly though. She could feel the dwarding straining against her hold. More than that, she was still aware of the strange and distant power stretching away from her. The longer she held on to it, the more she began to worry she would lose control over it and the more it started to squeeze in on the periphery of her vision. She could see the magic starting to constrict. But it was fading quickly.

It was a strange thing to be aware of.

She stretched out her hand and twisted it in a spiral of power, which she looped around the man. He was muscular, and appeared to be a few years older than Jayna. His eyes were closed, his breathing irregular.

If she didn't pull the dwarding out of him quickly, he would die.

The dwarding started to retreat, pulled back down into him. She tugged on it even more, constricting it. The strange power she held on to allowed her to sweep around in him even more effectively than she normally could. The more she looped power, the easier it was for her to hold on to the dwarding, and the more certain she was that she could trap it.

"Now," she said to Char.

"What do I do?"

"Can you feel the darkness within him?" Jayna watched him, and Char had his hand resting atop the man's chest, with a spell drifting from him and out into the man.

"I can feel something," Char said.

"Activate the enchantment. Pull it down inside."

"I think I can do it."

He triggered the enchantment. Jayna wasn't surprised he knew how. Char was gifted, and it didn't seem as if it would take all that much for him to trigger something like the enchantment.

"You have to trap it inside," she mumbled.

"I'm trying," he said.

"I know you are," she said.

She could feel he was trying, and she knew that even as he strained, he came closer to doing it than she would have the first time she had attempted it.

"Just guide it into the enchantment. Eva will help."

"I need to stay with you," Eva said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

"You don't have to be worried about me."

Eva ignored her, and the smoke still drifted from her, swirling outward.

As Jayna took a deep breath, she realized she breathed in some of Jayna's smoke.

Just what I need.

She started to draw the dwarding out, siphoning it into the enchantment.

There came a struggle.

Jayna constricted her power even more tightly, forcing it down into the enchantment. It held.

"Hand it here," Jayna said.

"Why?"

"I need to seal it off."

He reluctantly handed the enchantment over, and Jayna traced her fingers along the surface of it, sealing the dwarding inside. When it was done, she turned to the next man.

She had to work quickly. It meant Char had to work quickly too.

"I don't know how fast I can go," she said to him. "I used too much energy stopping Gabranth."

She found herself staring at Gabranth. She didn't think he moved, though she wouldn't put it past somebody with his power to somehow survive what would kill any other sorcerer. He was powerful—powerful enough to know how to create a festival like this so he could unleash dwarings and think to control them so he could summon Asymorn. Powerful enough that he could keep her from reaching Ceran.

She sent a pulsing of power through her ring.

There wasn't any resistance, which she hoped meant she would hear from him soon.

"That's not how sorcery works. It's not a matter of how much energy you have," Char said.

"I'm not only using sorcery," she said.

His eyes widened slightly, and he nodded.

She looped the snake spell around the dwarfing inside the other man and squeezed.

She pulled. As soon as she had that energy within the man, Char began to work. He dragged it down into one of the activated enchantments, holding the dwarfing more quickly than before.

She finished the next few as quickly as she could, and by the time she reached the last one, she barely had enough strength.

As she pulled on it, the dwarfing escaped.

It was like an amorphous cloud, and this one seemed to have wings, as if it were some flying creature determined to attack Char. It was slow and languid, energy expanding as it tried to absorb everything around it.

Jayna reacted the only way she knew how. She threw herself between him and the dwarfing, holding out her ring. She could barely stand, but she flicked the snake spell around the dwarfing, wrapping it up, and forced power out through the dragon stone ring. It shrieked.

It was a horrible sound that split the night. She started to constrict the power around the dwarding.

"Grab the enchantment," she mumbled.

"What?" Char could scarcely take his eyes off of the dwarding. She understood.

"The enchantment. Now."

When he handed it to her, Jayna pushed power and the dwarding into it. It struggled, but Char began to help. She could feel him helping through the linking spell.

And then it was done.

She sank to the ground. Eva strode over, plucking the enchantment off the ground, and placed a droplet of blood on it. Smoke swirled around the enchantment before shrinking down inside of it. The shrieking persisted for a moment until it went silent.

They were done. The dwarding were removed.

"We have to go," she said, looking over to Eva.

Her friend nodded, smoke swirling around her, though it still trailed toward Jayna, almost protectively.

"You can't go. Not like that," Char said.

Jayna staggered to her feet, finding the staff nearby, using it to lean on.

"I'm not staying for the Society to decide they are going to torment me."

Char watched her for a long moment. Finally, he swept his gaze around, lingering on each of the people who had had dwarding inside of them, before turning to Gabranth. "He was a dark sorcerer."

"That's what I've been telling you."

"I . . ." He shook his head, glancing to the space overhead. She could feel the magic of sorcery, and knew she didn't have much time. The moment the Society arrived, she would either have to fight her way free, or deal with the consequences of what she had done. She didn't care for either possibility. "Go. I will stall them."

"What are you going to say?" Jayna asked.

"I don't know. As much of the truth as I can."

"What about me?" Jayna could scarcely stand upright, but Char remained watching her.

"I don't know." He breathed out a long sigh. "I know that's not good enough, and I know that's not what you want, but that's all I can say right now."

She glanced to Eva.

They weren't going to be staying in the city much longer anyway. It didn't matter if the Society came after her.

And Char was letting her go.

It was a step in the right direction. A small one, but a step unless.

Eva helped her. They reached a section of fallen stone, where Eva glanced back.

"We shouldn't leave him," she said, nodding to Gabranth.

"What would you do?"

Eva closed her eyes for a moment, biting her lip. Smoke swirled out from her, and it circled Gabranth, squeezing down into a thick cloud. Jayna could feel something briefly.

Then the smoke cleared and Gabranth's body was gone.

"Come on. Let's go home."

STRANGE DREAMS CONSUMED JAYNA—DREAMS OF DARK POWER, mixed with light and flame, but always at the periphery of her vision. There were dreams of her parents, even though they had died all those years ago, and some of Jonathan, though he had stayed hidden from her even in her dreams. There were dreams of Eva and Char, too, and Ceran, though that was less surprising. She had dreamed of Ceran too many times, as if he forced her to remember him. It was his way of summoning *her*, she figured.

She sat up slowly.

It took her a moment to realize where she was.

Her home once again.

She'd survived.

She had barely made it back before collapsing. She didn't remember getting into her nightgown. Maybe Eva had done that for her. It would serve her right, especially as Jayna often had to care for Eva when she let herself get into the wrong state of mind. Jayna been too weakened to do much though.

Voices came from out in the main part of the home, and Jayna rubbed her eyes. She was exhausted still, and when she tried reaching for sorcery, she found that power buried within her, though it was balled up tightly and difficult to

reach. She released it immediately, not wanting to be overwhelmed by the agony of attempting to reach for power that was not meant for her to call upon just yet. It would take time for her to recover.

The dragon stone ring remained on her finger. She twisted it, and it wasn't as warm as it usually was. Did that mean she had gotten closer to darkness?

She didn't want to think it did, but what other explanation was there? Given all that she had gone through, everything she had experienced, Jayna couldn't help but think that maybe she had somehow tapped into some new dark energy. If so, she feared what that meant for her.

Char had been there. Char had seen what she had done. He would know.

He already thought the kind of work she had fallen into had turned her into some dark sorcerer, but having seen that would have only proved it to him—despite the fact she had done nothing of the sort.

It wouldn't matter to him. All that mattered to Char was the fact she was dealing with dark magics.

She swung her feet over the edge of her bed, attempting to stand before wobbling for a moment and sitting back down. The black staff leaned against the wall—not that it had been useful when she'd needed it.

What she needed now was more time to recuperate.

She twisted the dragon stone ring. She had not heard from Ceran since the festival. If the festival had been blocking her somehow, or if Gabranth had been blocking her somehow, she hoped to hear from him soon now. And she hoped he wouldn't be too angry that she had killed Gabranth. Not that she had much choice in the matter.

Jayna forced herself to her feet.

There was no point in him getting angry. Not at this point. Now that she had defeated the Celebrants of Asymorn, it was time for her to leave Nelar. She would have

to visit with Char first, not wanting to leave without at least explaining herself to him, but it was time. There was no reason for her to remain behind any longer.

She staggered over to the door before turning back. She didn't know who was in the home, and she wasn't about to go out dressed like this.

She dressed as quickly as she could, though far more slowly than usual, slipping on pants and a jacket, grabbing a knife just to be safe, before stumbling forward. She held her hand on the wall, using that to prop herself up and guide her along. She reached the main part of the home, then she froze.

Eva sat near the fire in her usual plush chair, a glass of wine in hand. Her eyes were slightly red-rimmed, and she had the fire crackling incredibly brightly, the room blazing with heat.

Another man sat across from her.

"Topher?" she muttered.

Eva turned to her. "You should still be sleeping," she said.

"I don't know how I can sleep any longer with the two of you out here yammering," Jayna said. She staggered over to the table where she sank down in one of the chairs, resting her head on her elbow. It amazed her just how tired she still was. "How long did I sleep?"

"Not long enough," Eva said.

"How long?"

She looked over to Topher. He looked refreshed. His eyes sparkled, his black hair was combed back, and somehow he had managed to find ale in their home, which Jayna found surprising.

"Three days," Eva said.

Jayna blinked. "Three *days*?"

It explained why her stomach felt so hollow and empty. She had never slept that long.

Of course, she had never fully connected to the Toral magic that way.

Not sorcery, though.

That was a matter of knowledge and speed, not of any real strength. She was exhausted.

"You spent quite a lot of yourself," Eva said.

"How are they?" Jayna asked, referring to the men whom she and Char had removed the dwaring from.

"Alive." Eva nodded to Topher. "This one won't leave us alone. He claimed he didn't need the help the others did, so he followed us back here like a puppy."

"I didn't need the help. Once she removed that thing from me, I felt better. I'd been fighting it as long as I could—especially after I knew what it was—but I couldn't fight it completely."

"I can't even imagine," Jayna said. "I only felt a hint of it."

Even that was enough to know she didn't *want* to know what it was like to have a dwaring feeding inside of her.

She might not have survived nearly as long as Topher had.

Jayna took a deep breath, letting it out. Three days. She had been sleeping for three days. But all she could think about was crashing and sleeping for another three days.

"You still haven't told me what happened with the others," Jayna said.

"The others were brought to the outpost," Eva said.

"Char decided to help them?"

It shouldn't surprise her. Char had always been a healer. It was what was expected from him. Still, he had let her go. And the fact that the Society hadn't come for her in the three days she had been out suggested that he had bought her more than just a little time. She would have to thank him.

Maybe the Society would even admit there was dark magic in the city.

Jayna wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. It meant the sorcerers were going to be more vigilant. They would be on edge, and they would hunt for those dark magic users, though there wasn't a whole lot they would be able to do when it came to stopping them. Perhaps they could stop some of the basic dark magic, but even that was far easier for people like Jayna to manage than any of the sorcerers.

Not that Char would believe that though.

"He's been coming around to check on you," Eva said.

"I'm sure he was worried," Jayna muttered.

"You don't think he cares?" Topher asked.

Jayna bit back a response. She didn't know Topher, and she had no interest in explaining her relationship with Char to him, nor did she have any interest in letting him know Char would see the kind of magic she had been using as dark and dangerous, rather than recognizing the good she had done. And she *had* done good. She knew it. It was obvious when she had saved the others, obvious she had managed to prevent the Celebrants of Asymorn from succeeding. They had not managed to free Asymorn, after all.

"I—"

A knock at the door caught her attention, and Jayna started to get up but Topher beat her to it, holding on to his mug of ale and hurrying over to the door. When he reached it, he glanced over at Jayna, grinning. "See? He was checking on you."

Char stood in the doorway wearing his maroon sorcerer's robe.

"Why don't we go get more wine," Eva said, grabbing Topher and dragging him out of the home.

Jayna shot her a look, but Eva ignored it.

When the door closed, Char came and took a seat across from her. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I just slept for three days."

"I've been stopping by."

"I've heard that."

"And you slept each time I came."

"That's what I was told," she said.

They sat in silence for a moment. "The others are all recovering. They should make a full recovery, even."

"That's good, I guess," Jayna said. She looked up and found Char looking at her the way he once had, filled with questions, curiosity, and a hint of something more. "What did you tell them?" she asked.

"What did I tell the men who were attacked, or what did I tell the sorcerers?"

"Both."

"The men who were attacked don't remember anything. For now, that's probably for the best. Eventually, I imagine that he"—he nodded to the door where Topher had left—"will share something. He's been asking about a couple of them whom he knows, so I doubt you're going to keep it secret for too long."

"It's not about keeping it a secret," she said. At least, it wasn't going to be about keeping it a secret as soon as she left the city. That would happen soon enough, and when she did, she didn't have to worry about anyone knowing about her connection to magic, or about the kind of things she could do. She wouldn't have to worry about revealing the existence of the dark powers out in the world.

"They know about the dark magic—there was no way to hide that—but I haven't told them anything about you."

She breathed out slowly. "You didn't."

"I wanted to talk to you myself. I wanted to understand. To really understand."

"I don't know if it's safe for them to know about this kind of power," she said.

And not only was it potentially unsafe, but there was the danger of temptation. What had Gabranth been like before he had been drawn by that power?

"Maybe," he agreed. "But you might be surprised. The Society wants to help." He took a deep breath, resting his hands on the table in front of her. "I'm worried about you. I know you're going to tell me I don't need to be, and you're going to tell me that you aren't using dark magic, but I saw what I saw. I felt what I felt." He looked down at the dragon stone ring. "I'm not at all sure what's been going on, but I also know you're doing some good. I can't claim to understand all of it, but . . . I guess I can try."

He reached across the table, and she hesitated before taking his hand.

"If you're going to be in the city for a while, it would be nice to see you again—and not in the middle of the night when you sneak up on my window and break the glass."

She chuckled. "I would like that." She didn't have the heart to tell him she had no idea how much longer she would be in the city. At this point, she had made some trouble for herself, and it might be hard to remain there. Master Raollet would most certainly continue to try to get revenge for what she had done, and there was the danger of those who had noticed the kind of magic she'd been using.

More than that, there was the danger of the outpost realizing somebody was using sorcerers' magic that they didn't control. She was not to reveal she was Toral, nor the presence of her kind of power overall. That was her instruction.

"I see," Char said.

"What exactly do you see?"

"You don't hide things from me nearly as well as you think you do, Jayna Aguelon."

"Hide?"

He shrugged. "You might think you do, but you're not nearly as clever as you want to be."

"What is it, then?"

"I can see it in your eyes. You don't know how long you're going to be here."

She smiled sadly. "No. I don't."

"Well, regardless, I'd like to see you while you *are* here. Can we at least agree to that?"

She smiled at him, nodding. "I can agree to that."

"Good." He watched her for a while. "You look like you need sleep. I won't keep you. But after you get some rest, why don't you send word to me? Or you can even come yourself. I won't tell Master Agnew who you are or let him know about your experience with the Academy. I won't say anything unless you want me to."

She just nodded.

Char released her hand and got to his feet.

A pang of longing worked through her. She didn't want to let go of him. She had already done that once, and it had been hard enough then. She had never expected to have to do it a second time.

But the work she did was dangerous, and there was no guarantee she would stay here for much longer.

In fact, it was likely she would not.

Char watched her again for a few moments, then headed to the door, disappearing.

Jayna let out a long sigh, then rested her head on the table.

She'd just planned on resting her head for a moment. When she came around, she hadn't felt like she had been sleeping for very long. The dragon stone ring started to vibrate.

Relief washed through her.

It was unusual to feel relief when Ceran summoned her, but after so long in silence, she was just happy to detect anything again.

She got to her feet. She was unsteady, and her body ached. How long had she been sleeping at the table?

She looked around the inside of the room. The fire had burned down, leaving a comfortable flame, not the blazing heat Eva had preferred. She wondered where they had gone off to. Maybe they had realized she'd been sleeping and stayed away, or maybe they had found the tavern and ended up staying there. Either way, it didn't matter.

Jayna found her cloak draped over the chair, slipped it on, and headed out in the streets. She followed the pulsing of the dragon stone ring through the growing darkness, but knew exactly where it was going to take her. She reached the edge of the city, the forest casting dark shadows out into it, as the ring started to vibrate with much more intensity. She waited for a little while, but not too long before a shadow separated from the darkness.

He didn't step forward enough for her to see his face, but she imagined him smiling.

"How much of the Festival of Mourn did you detect?" Jayna asked him.

"I could feel your use of power, but I could do nothing about it."

"You couldn't come?"

She tried to hide the hurt, but it was difficult. She served him, and would've expected him to come when she needed him. Since he hadn't, and had left her to deal with it alone, perhaps he might not care as much as she believed.

"I tried."

She waited, thinking he might say something more, but he didn't.

Tried.

It meant Gabranth had cut him off, beyond blocking her from reaching him.

"He's gone," she said.

"I know."

"I'm sorry. I know you wanted me to capture him, and I tried, but I couldn't—"

Ceran arched a brow, cutting her off. "You did well, Jayna Aguelon. I know you thought you needed my help, but you did it."

"I could've used your help. I might have been able to save him."

He frowned. "There are some who cannot be saved."

Did he mean Gabranth . . . or Jonathan?

"I have the dwarding trapped in enchantments. I figured you should dispose of them." When he nodded, she went on. "Did we stop it?"

She thought about the way the sky had looked, the darkness. There had been a tear in the sky itself. She had tried to stop Gabranth before he had succeeded, but there was a part of her that feared she hadn't been fast enough.

"I don't know," Ceran said. "Asymorn has always been a challenge. One of the more powerful of his kind."

"So there are others."

"There are," he said.

"Twelve?" It was what Eva had remembered from stories. And if there were twelve like Asymorn, did that mean Ceran intended her to be involved in keeping them from escaping?

"Something like that."

"Why don't you tell me what I need to know?"

He breathed out slowly, and he seemed to turn away from her. "They were imprisoned long ago. The prison should have been powerful enough to hold them, but there are those like Gabranth who have come to learn secrets that should've been lost to time. They have attempted to release what should never have been released: seals that lock Asymorn and the others like him in place." He looked over to her. "I cannot say whether you succeeded in stopping Gabranth from releasing Asymorn. We will have to

be vigilant. I will help, and I will continue to train you, but we must be ready."

"I'm sorry."

He frowned. "Do you think I am disappointed in what you did? You succeeded where others might not have."

"The power—"

"Is the power." He nodded to her. "I told you that most cannot withstand it. Very few, in fact. That you might be able to is part of what drew me to you."

He fell silent.

Jayna was exhausted still, but she felt as if she still needed answers from Ceran, and she didn't often get him talking like this.

"Can you keep teaching me?"

He turned to her, and a small smile curled his lips. "I believe I have been."

"If I'm going to face the Celebrants of Asymorn, and the Celebrants of others like him—"

"They do not go by the same name."

"Well, then whatever they are. I want to be prepared. I want to know as much as possible. I want to be able to stop them."

"I will teach what I can, when I can. Some things, as you have seen, you must do on your own. I'm afraid another time may come when you will be left to your own devices."

"Why?" She took a step toward him, and for a moment, she thought Ceran wasn't really there with her, despite how solid he appeared. Then he stepped away. "Why can't you work directly with me? You gave me this ring, and you gave me this power."

"I only gave you access to the power," he said, his voice soft, "and now I need to do something much worse."

He reached for her, touching her ring, and there came a sudden surge of power that flashed and flared within her mind before fading altogether.

Then he turned away, disappearing into the forest before she had a chance to ask him anything else. Having faced Asymorn, having seen that dark power, she knew it was beyond her ability to handle. Or very nearly so.

The dark energy that flared in the ring with Ceran's touch left her worried.

How much more would Ceran prepare Jayna to face?

The next book in The Dark Sorcerer: [A City in Ruin](#)



Strange fires threaten to destroy the city of Nelar that Jayna alone can't stop.

After stopping a powerful dark sorcerer, Jayna finds herself a target. Not only does the Sorcerers' Society think she uses dark magic, the Celebrants of Asymorn want vengeance for her interference. She'd leave the city, Ceran has shown her that something worse is still to come.

When it does, she's still unprepared.

Nearly killed by a strange fire even her dark magic could not extinguish, she needs to find those responsible before the city is destroyed—or worse, plunged into war.

Even stopping the fires might not be enough. The dark sorcerers have begun to move, and Jayna might need to surrender to her magic in order to stop them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading Festival of Mourn. I hope you enjoyed it. If you would be so kind as to take a moment to leave a review on [Amazon](#) or elsewhere, I would be very grateful.

I'm also always happy to hear from readers! Email me at dkh@dkholmberg.com. I try to respond to each message. Don't forget to follow me on Facebook as well!

Review link [HERE](#).

All my best,
D.K. Holmberg

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